

# The Coffeeness of Costa Rica

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THE COFFEENESS OF COSTA RICA

BY

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## **Abstract**

Costa Rica is a place that has come to be associated with coffee. The coffeeness of Costa Rica is possible due to a unique combination of physical and social elements, and elements of culture and meaning that have been pulled together in Costa Rica by the force of place. Costa Ricans and non-Costa Ricans have informed Costa Rica's national identity as symbolized by coffee. Within Costa Rica, coffee and the development of the coffee industry have played a pivotal role in national identity formation. Costa Rica is participating in a world-system wherein capital wealth is exported from nation-states in the periphery to nation-states in the core. By exporting un-roasted coffee to the United States and Europe for roasting and sale, it is also exporting their culture "up" the commodity chain, by sending along images of coffee farmers and ideas of cooperative-based fair trade.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Coffee is a commodity that is tied up in the history of Costa Rica and the development of Costa Rica's national identity. Coffee was introduced to Costa Rica as a novelty, first gained popularity as a beverage whose consumption was a way to emulate European society, and then developed into an important export and a symbol of Costa Rican identity. Costa Ricans became coffee producers and coffee consumers. This study examines how coffee became a part of Costa Rica's national identity, drawing on a geographic understanding of place. Bridging ideas about national identity, construction of place, and world-system theory, I will examine the ways in which Costa Rican identity formation and the development of the coffee industry have been related. I argue that coffee has had profound effects on the construction of Costa Rican politics, the economy, society, and culture. Many important decisions in Costa Rican history have been made over coffee—both with coffee interests in mind, and, likely, while consuming coffee.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, by exporting coffee throughout the world, Costa Ricans are contributing to how Costa Rica is situated in the world. Costa Rica and its identity would have been substantially different in the absence of coffee.

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Vega Jiménez has examined in depth the importance of coffee consumption in Costa Rica. Patricia Vega Jiménez, *Con sabor a tertulia: Historia del consume del café en Costa Rica (1840-1940)* (San José: U de Costa Rica, 2004).

## Coffee Consumption and Production

Coffee is the second most valuable commodity in the world after petroleum.<sup>2</sup> Each year more than 15 billion pounds of coffee are consumed, and of that amount, approximately 370 million pounds originate in Costa Rica.<sup>3</sup> Tiny Costa Rica still produces nearly two and a half percent of the world's coffee, even at a time when prices have been low and other products are becoming more important in the Costa Rican economy. In the face of these obstacles, farming families, many of whom have been growing coffee for generations, continue to produce coffee even when they cannot make a living. Moreover, consumers continue demanding coffee from Costa Rica, and they are often willing to pay premium prices to get it.

Coffee came to Costa Rica during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, though the exact date of its first introduction to Costa Rica is unclear.<sup>4</sup> It developed as an important agricultural export starting in the 1840s when it became clear that the natural environment of Costa Rica was well suited for coffee production and that Europeans, especially the British, were willing to purchase it in large quantities. As the market has developed, Costa Rica has worked hard to maintain its niche. Today, "maintaining the high quality of its export coffee is a prime concern of the Costa Rican state. Costa Rican coffee has always enjoyed a reputation for excellent quality, particularly in Europe,

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<sup>2</sup> John Roach, "Coffee Glut Brews Crisis for Farmers, Wildlife," *National Geographic News*, April 24, 2003, NationalGeographic.com. [http://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/0424\\_030424\\_coffeecrisis.html](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/0424_030424_coffeecrisis.html) (accessed December 9, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Commodity Research Bureau, "Coffee," *2004 Commodity Research Articles*, Community Research Bureau, Chicago, <http://www.crbrtrader.com/fund/articles/coffee.asp>, (accessed June 12, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Vega notes that by 1781, a Sra. María Fuentes had ordered four coffee mills, Vega 5. Carolyn Hall notes that in 1808, Governor Tomás de Acosta had coffee, but recognizes that he was not the first to have coffee in Costa Rica, though no actual year for coffee introduction is given. Carolyn Hall, *El café y el desarrollo histórico-geográfico de Costa Rica* (San José: Editorial Costra Rica, 1976) 33.



and keeping that reputation is one way for a small nation to hold its place in a glutted world market.”<sup>5</sup> Other commodities have achieved higher percentages of the Costa Rican market, namely bananas, but according to Richard Biesanz, “it is the crop closest to Costa Rican hearts and pocketbooks, and is surrounded by a cultural mystique and folklore that invest it with an aura of romance and national pride.”<sup>6</sup>

## The Physical Geography of Costa Rica

Map 1  
Map of Costa Rica



Source: Compiled by Jonathan Thayne and Darin Grauberger, Kansas University Cartography Lab

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Sick, *Farmers of the Golden Bean: Costa Rican Households and the Global Coffee Economy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1999) 29.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Biesanz, Karen Zubris Biesanz, and Mavis Hiltunen Biesanz, *The Costa Ricans*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1987) 31.

Costa Rica is known throughout the world as an epicenter for the conservationist and green movements, and several unique characteristics of its physical geography and climate contribute to maintaining its place as such an epicenter,<sup>7</sup> and a place tied to coffee. For one thing, the Central American isthmus of which Costa Rica is a part is the only place in the world that lies between two oceans and connects two continents.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Costa Rica is a physically varied country, comprised primarily of a young, rugged cordillera spotted with active volcanoes and flanked by lowlands and tropical beaches. Located within the tropics, Costa Rica experiences the effects of trade winds, which are complicated by varying elevations to create a “complex succession of microclimates” and fluctuating seasonal patterns.<sup>9</sup> All of this geographical and climatic variety has led to the biological diversity for which Costa Rica is so famous. Moreover, the volcanic soils and physical geography of Costa Rica have created an environment in the central highlands of the country that is ideal for coffee production.

Costa Rica is a small country of approximately 51,000 square kilometers, with no less than twelve distinct “life zones,” including tropical dry, tropical moist, tropical wet, premontane dry, premontane moist, premontane rain, lower montane dry, lower montane moist, lower mountain rain, montane wet, and montane rain

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<sup>7</sup> For a look at the effects of ecotourism on Costa Rica due to this distinction, see Susan E. Place, “Ecotourism and the Political Ecology of ‘Sustainable Development’ in Costa Rica,” *Tropical Rainforests: Latin American Nature and Society in Transition*, Ed. Susan E. Place, Jaguar Books on Latin America 2 (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2001.) 221-31. See also Sterling Evans, *The Green Republic: A Conservation History of Costa Rica, 1838-1996*, (PhD Diss: Kansas University, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Hall, *Costa Rica: A Geographical Interpretation in Historical Perspective*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, *Costa Rica*, 12.

forests, as well as a small area of subalpine rain paramo.<sup>10</sup> Coffee is grown within the premontane area, which, along with the lower tropical areas makes up around 85% of the country.<sup>11</sup> The premontane and the tropical areas are characterized as frost-free, making them key agricultural regions.

Coffee is a finicky plant that thrives in conditions where temperatures are warm during the day and cooler at night. Frost is particularly dangerous to coffee, and even one frost can ruin an entire crop. Elevations between 500 and 1000 meters above sea level are optimal because these altitudes experience the daily temperature fluctuations that are most favorable to producing an excellent coffee crop. Coffee also produces best when it receives between 1000 and 3000 mm per year of rainfall,<sup>12</sup> spread throughout the year. The quality of coffee produced depends on, among other things, precise, favorable climatic conditions. This is one reason that coffee can be marketed to certain consumers based on the area in which it was grown; different farms experience different conditions based on their physical location and thus their physical environment.

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<sup>10</sup> Hall, *Costa Rica*, 12. The life zones cited by Hall and in this work, come from the work of L.R. Holdridge. Hall notes that this classification system is more useful for Costa Rica than some other classification systems because it takes into consideration elevation, as well as latitude when determining variations in climate.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, *Costa Rica*, 26, 158

<sup>12</sup> Bernardo Aguilar and Julie Klocker, "The Costa Rican Coffee Industry," *Quantifying Sustainable Development: The Future of Tropical Economies*, Ed. Charles A. S. Hall (San Diego: Academic Press, 2000) 601.

## Theoretical Approach

Exploration of various elements related to national identity helps determine the manner in which Costa Rica developed an identity tied up in coffee. These elements can be thought of as creating the “coffeeness” of Costa Rica, or in other words, the representations of Costa Rica’s coffee identity. This study recognizes that coffee is but one factor in creation of a Costa Rican national identity. However, while other factors have contributed to its construction, coffee has been one of the most consistent ingredients and its most common symbols. The coffeeness of Costa Rica is rooted in the place in which it was formed. It is at once an instrument in construction of a national culture, a symbol of connectedness to a place, and a way for Costa Rica to market and define itself in a global commodity system.

## Culture and Identity

Identity, cultural or otherwise, is not something that one creates independently. Rather, it is continuously informed and reformed by external factors such as the opinions and expectations of other people, cultural norms, physical characteristics of the environment, and societal infrastructures formed by an agglomeration of other peoples’ decisions, in addition to one’s own self-perception.

Historian Ana Patricia Fumero-Vargas points out that

identities are part of a complex social network and not only constructed by institutions (laws and social control for example), identities consist of the

recognition of what is common, and the attempt to show publicly what is different.<sup>13</sup>

Construction of an identity cannot simply be attributed to one element or one process.

Alberto Melucci notes that identity is a matter of personal agency on the part of actors in its formation.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Stuart Hall reminds us that identity is

“ascribed,”<sup>15</sup> by “the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power.”<sup>16</sup> Identities are complicated, in continuous flux, and the result of inputs from various internal and external sources.

Creation of a national identity leads to a notion of community. Benedict Anderson has famously claimed that communities are in reality a matter of our imaginations.<sup>17</sup> In light of the idea of “imagined communities,”

members of a community internalize an image of the community not as a group of anomic individuals but as interconnected members who share equally in their fundamental membership in the community.<sup>18</sup>

In Costa Rica, a part of that image is the view that has developed of the nation as a coffee producing and coffee consuming community. Use of images of coffee and coffee production in publications and art since the 1840s, and other appearances of

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<sup>13</sup> Ana Patricia Fumero-Vargas, *National Identities in Central America in Comparative Perspective: The Modern Public Sphere and the Celebration of the Centennial of Central American Independence, September 15, 1921* (PhD Diss.: Kansas University, 2005) 16.

<sup>14</sup> In Fumero-Vargas, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Fumero-Vargas, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation,” *Framework* 36 (1989) 70. qtd. in Fumero-Vargas, 17.

<sup>17</sup> His famous work on “imagined communities” is Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Leo R. Chavez, “The Power of the Imagined Community: The Settlement of Undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series 96, No. 1 (March 1994) 54.

coffee in culture and politics have established coffee as a symbol of this community.<sup>19</sup> The association of Costa Rica with its coffee by consumers has strengthened the potency of coffee as a symbol of Costa Rican identity.

## Geographic Framework for Understanding Place and Self

Places have profound effects on the identities we forge for ourselves. Sack reminds us that “we are geographical beings transforming the earth and making it into a home, and that transformed world affects who we are.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, one’s self-perception is constantly being reshaped and reformed in an ongoing dialectical process that begs that its impermanence not be taken for granted. In this way, identity is related to and inseparable from place, which is also in a constant state of flux. We can even go so far as to say that the self, and thus one’s identity, and place are “mutually constitutive.”<sup>21</sup>

In fact, our identities are so closely linked to the places we construct that place acts as “an agent in the formation of the self.”<sup>22</sup> Our daily activities are defined both by the places we consciously inhabit and the places we simply pass through without realizing we are doing so. The creation of place is an ongoing project to understand reality, and humans are compelled to participate in it.<sup>23</sup> We are inextricably involved in the project of reshaping and reforming places, individually and collectively, and we

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<sup>19</sup> Further exploration of the ways in which coffee acts as a symbol and expression of national identity in Costa Rica can be found in chapter 3 of this work.

<sup>20</sup> Robert David Sack, *Homo Geographicus* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997) 1.

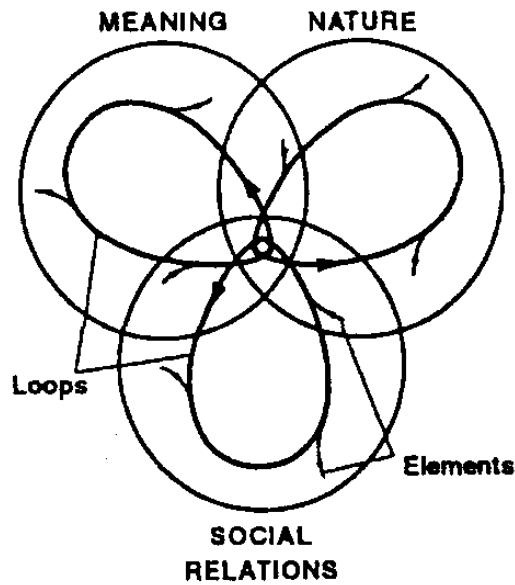
<sup>21</sup> Robert David Sack, “The Geographic Problematic: Empirical Issues,” *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift—Norwegian Journal of Geography* (2001): 112.

<sup>22</sup> Sack, *Homo Geographicus*, 132.

<sup>23</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, “A View of Geography.” *Geographical Review* 81, No. 1 (Jan. 1991) 99.

participate in this project because we are driven to make places the way we think they should be.<sup>24</sup>

Figure 1  
A Sackian View of Place



Source: Sack, “Fig. 5. The loom-like quality of place: its three loops,” from “The Geographic Problematic: Empirical Issues,” 109.

Place acts as a force that pulls together the elements that constitute it which are nature, meaning, and social relations. While one realm may take precedence in a certain place, at a certain moment, place cannot be reduced to only one or two of the realms. All three realms are an essential part of a place. In other words, place is made up of a variety of pieces that together create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

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<sup>24</sup> Sack, *Homo Geographicus*, 24.

Sack, then, describes place as a loom that weaves together elements from the three realms that constitute place,<sup>25</sup> which are traditionally separated in academia as the humanities, social sciences, and the natural sciences. To understand a place, one must consider the way it is formed by each of these realms, and our role as agents in this process. In the words of Sack, “the very fact that place combines the unconstructed physical space in conjunction with social rules and meaning enables place to draw together the three realms, and makes place constitutive of ourselves as agents.”<sup>26</sup> Place is a synthesizing force, and as human beings that construct places, we take an active role in that process. Exploration of the formation of a place is one way to explore the identity of a people. According to Sack, “place often defines a group and provides it an identity.”<sup>27</sup> Costa Ricans have used coffee to create a place to which their identity is tied.

Places, though, do not exist in isolation from other places. In fact, they inform and are informed by all other places with which they have contact. Places can be connected by physical proximity, by movement of people between places, by ideas that are exchanged, and by the exchange of commodities. In the same way that Costa Ricans are asserting their national identity by exporting ideas about their culture along with the coffee, consumers are contributing to the formation of a Costa Rican national identity by purchasing and consuming Costa Rican coffee. The study of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 88-98.

<sup>26</sup> Sack, *Homo Geographicus*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 135.



commodity chains provides a special opportunity to examine the way that places are linked economically and culturally by commodity exchange.

## World-System Theory, Consumption, and Identity

Looking beyond the traditional ways that movement of commodities is perceived in the commodity chain and world-system theory approaches can provide useful methods of recognizing the relationships that exist in the movement of commodities. These approaches are also useful for examining the way that Costa Rican identity is manifested in the global market. World-system theory proposes that the world is made up of core states, or the wealthiest and most powerful states, the periphery states, which are the poorest, least developed states, and the semi-periphery, which includes all those states that fall somewhere between the core and the periphery. These categories represent the developmental distance a state has traversed from having a food-export and primary-product economy, the kind of economy with which all states begin. Those states in the core were the first to function primarily off of agricultural commodity production. As they moved to more value-added products, those states now in the semi-periphery took over global production of primary agricultural products. Now, core states produce highly-technological products and rely on the service industry, while the semi-periphery has taken over lower technology production and the periphery produces the world's food.

Markets and consumers' perceptions of their positions within them have changed and continue to change, constantly remaking and redefining in a dialectical

process the various components of those markets. As networks of interactions between capital, labor, and desires, markets and the entities that make them up are complex. World-system theory and other approaches to commodity chain analysis can be useful in attempting to grasp the complex interactions involved in the movement of a commodity from its origin of production to the place it is consumed. One of the dangers of this method of analysis is that it is generally conceptualized as both linear and deterministic. The commodity is normally conceptualized as moving in a line from place of production (normally a less-developed place) to the place of consumption, which is normally a more developed place. These types of analysis tend to ignore the circular production chains that sometimes result when products and culture are packaged together, as is often the case in the coffee market.

Coffee farmers are sending something intangible to consumers along with their coffee—which may be cultural ideas, feelings of moral obligation to purchase more of the same coffee, or social capital associated with being seen as “doing the right thing” by buying coffee grown and sold in certain ways. These “add-ons” to the coffee itself keep customers coming back for more, by buying more and more into Costa Rican coffee and even by visiting the place where their favorite coffee is grown. Producers are manipulating market demands in the same way as consumers. Costa Rican coffee has developed as both a commodity and as an expression of Costa Rican identity on the world market.

## Literature Review

Several influential studies have treated the coffee industry in Latin America. These studies include *Coffee, Society, and Power in Latin America*, edited by William Roseberry et al., and *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* by Jeffery M. Paige. These two seminal works are necessary reading for the person interested in the general topic of the coffee industry in Latin America. The work edited by Roseberry is a compilation of articles that treat the social and political history of coffee in various countries in Latin America. Paige's book explores the role of coffee in the political and social development in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. He eventually reaches the conclusion that the agro-elite in each country have used the ideologies first of anti-communism, and recently, of neo-liberalism, to ignore and disguise gross inequalities of wealth amongst the populations of their respective countries.

A multitude of authors, including Anthony Winson, Theodore Creedman, Carolyn Hall, Lowell Gudmundson, Mitchell Allan Seligson, and José Cazanga have looked at the political-historical development of Costa Rica. Winson in particular has focused his work on the coffee industry and the cooperative sector. Hall and Seligson make up opposing sides of an important point of contention within this topic. Hall plays down the divisions in classes in the coffee industry of Costa Rica, while Seligson maintains that there have been and are marked class differences within the coffee producing population. The writings of these authors form an informational

backdrop to this more specific study on the qualities that make Costa Rica a coffee place.

Other studies have examined Costa Rica geographically, especially concerning the environmental movement and the issue of sustainable development there, including Carolyn Hall. Carolyn Hall has most approximated the type of study attempted here, with her significant works *El café y el desarrollo histórico-geográfico de Costa Rica* and *Costa Rica: A Geographical Interpretation in Historical Perspective*, both of which draw on the fields of history and geography to present a thorough and comprehensive account of the development of the coffee industry.

Patricia Vega Jiménez's recent work *Con sabor a tertulia: Historia del consume del café en Costa Rica*, is an important examination of the development of a national identity associated with coffee consumption. In this work, Vega Jiménez explores the ways that coffee began in Costa Rica as a drink that defined social classes. But because coffee was produced in Costa Rica, and because the Costa Rican government encouraged its consumption as a way to secure economic prosperity, coffee consumption became a common social ritual of consumption for Costa Ricans from all positions in the social spectrum, and an expression of cultural identity. She concludes that various cultural, economic and political factors, including coffee production, coalesced in Costa Rican history to create a Costa Rican identity tied to coffee consumption.

These works have all made significant and important contributions to scholarship, and established a basis for a more in-depth investigation of the qualities

that make Costa Rica a place for coffee. In addition, they lay the groundwork for consideration of the seldom noted importance of the places comprising a commodity's path, specifically the commodity path of coffee. This work will contribute to the discussion of the role of coffee in Costa Rica by creating a place-based analysis of Costa Rica as a coffee and cooperative place, as informed by the fields of political economics, history, and geography. Attempting to define Costa Rica as a coffee place may seem a simple task at first. To treat the idea that it has been created and is continuously being created by various factors, including its inhabitants, its physical environment, and cultural expectations placed on it from the outside is not an effortless endeavor, though. No place is simple, and endeavoring to comprehensively delineate even one aspect of one place is an arduous task with an ever-receding endpoint.

## Summary and Method

The focus of this study is to examine how and why Costa Rica developed an identity that is tied to coffee. Following this introductory chapter, the paper will examine the ways that this identity was formed and the ways in which it is expressed.

Chapter 2 will review the development of the coffee sector in Costa Rica beginning with the crop's prominence as an export commodity. The chapter examines the political and economic development of Costa Rica's coffee economy, and pays special attention to the development of the cooperative sector as a significant part of the industry.

Chapter 3 examines the various ways in which coffee is an important part of Costa Rican identity. Costa Ricans have been both coffee producers and coffee consumers and both elements of their identity have been expressed in economics, society, politics, and culture. Coffee has played an important role in many aspects of Costa Rican life.

Chapter 4 examines Costa Rica's identity as a coffee place in the global economy. Costa Rica is known as a place that produces high-quality coffee, even when coffee exports have diminished in importance to the economy of Costa Rica. Costa Rican coffee producers have found ways to capitalize on their country's reputation to secure a stronger hold on their share of the market.

The summary and conclusions in Chapter 5 provide a succinct review of how coffee came to inform Costa Rica's national identity, and how this identity is expressed. Coffee in Costa Rica started as a fashionable beverage that expressed social status, developed into an export commodity that was critical to the country's economy, and has now diminished in economic importance but remains an important beverage and symbol of Costa Rican national culture, domestically and in the world.

## Chapter 2. The Historical Development of the Coffee Sector

Europeans first settled Costa Rica as a province in the Kingdom of Guatemala during the 1560s.<sup>28</sup> European settlement was relatively sparse, but immediately pivotal to the make-up of the population. Prior to European arrival, the indigenous population was around 400,000. However, the number of indigenous peoples in the region declined drastically once contact with Europeans was made; the indigenous population in 1569 was just over 17,000.<sup>29</sup> However, Geographer Carolyn Hall cautions, “in Costa Rica, the legacy of European colonization has been out of all proportion to the number of immigrants from Spain.”<sup>30</sup> After all, only a few thousand Europeans inhabited Costa Rica during the colonial period.<sup>31</sup>

Costa Rica was the furthest province in the Kingdom from its capital in what is now Guatemala, and it remained rather isolated from the other provinces in the Kingdom. In addition to the sheer distance between Costa Rica and Guatemala, there were severe communication problems partly because the terrain between Costa Rican settlers in the Central Valley and Spanish officials in Guatemala was extremely difficult to traverse. As a result of this isolation, Costa Rica developed quite autonomously. In fact, it was much to the surprise of Costa Ricans when they learned they had been granted independence from Spain in 1821, since the physical and

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<sup>28</sup> Carolyn Hall, *Costa Rica*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

political isolation of the province from the rest of the colony had precluded Costa Rican participation in the independence movement.<sup>32</sup>

Other contributing factors to the lesser amount of Spanish influence in Costa Rica relative to other Central American provinces included the lack of a natural, Atlantic port and the fact that no gold was initially found there, in spite of the hopes of the Spaniards who named the country the “rich coast.” As Mitchell Seligson points out, few families were willing to leave their homes in Spain only to have to work hard on their small parcel of land for the rest of their days to simply feed themselves.<sup>33</sup> The small population and the quickly diminishing numbers of indigenous peoples made land readily available. These factors also contributed to and helped perpetuate the myth of a white, rural democracy. Tied up in these developments is the production and consumption of coffee.

### Coffee as an Export Commodity

During colonial times, the economy of Costa Rica was based primarily on the growth of subsistence crops, as well as a small-scale sale of agricultural “provisions” to other Spanish-American colonies.<sup>34</sup> Costa Rica was left “isolated, sparsely populated, and abandoned by the colonial authorities,” and “the province was one of the poorest in America.”<sup>35</sup> Eventually, production of cacao and tobacco for export

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<sup>32</sup> Biesanz, et al., 18.

<sup>33</sup> Mitchell Allan Seligson, *Peasant and Agrarian Capitalism in Costa Rica* (PhD. Diss., U of Pittsburgh: 1974) 16.

<sup>34</sup> Hall, *Costa Rica*, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



began to provide much needed income, setting the stage for the export economy based on tropical and sub-tropical agricultural products that would form much of the rest of Costa Rican export development. Coffee was introduced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and became one of the country's most important commodities during the 1840s.<sup>36</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Costa Rica converted from a sparsely populated country of subsistence farmers on communal lands, to a developing country with a smallholder agricultural economy based on cash crops. This conversion can largely be attributed to coffee, and at the end of the century, bananas.<sup>37</sup>

Coffee's eventual importance in Costa Rica was not immediately evident upon introduction of the plant, however.<sup>38</sup> Biesanz points out that "when coffee was first cultivated in Costa Rica, coffee plants were little more than botanical curiosities." Coffee was initially a drink for the "notable" sections of society in Costa Rica, due to its cost and the fact that only those with contact with European society were clued in to the custom.<sup>39</sup> Later,

because coffee was becoming a modish drink in Europe, the municipalities, and later the republican government, encouraged its cultivation by gifts of plants to the poor, decrees that every homeowner plant a few trees near his house, exemptions from tithes, and land grants.<sup>40</sup>

The mid- to late-nineteenth century saw the Costa Rican coffee industry develop beyond that of its neighbors for several reasons. Without production of other export products established, the majority of the country's resources could be devoted to

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<sup>36</sup> Hall, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Carolyn Hall, *Formación de una hacienda cafetalera: 1889-1911*, (San José: Ed. U. de Costa Rica, 1978) 8. Hall, *Costa Rica*, 73-5.

<sup>38</sup> Biesanz, et al., 18-9.

<sup>39</sup> Vega, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Biesanz, et al., 18-9.

coffee production. Costa Rica was unusually well-suited for a profitable coffee production economy, but it was only in conjunction with a growing cultural taste for coffee consumption and encouragement from the government that coffee gained economic importance.

British involvement in Central American economies began during colonial times, but grew stronger after Central American independence from Spain. The British were eager to purchase Central American goods and had designs on participating in the creation of a trans-isthmian route.<sup>41</sup> Historian Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr. notes that, as a matter of diplomatic courtesy, “by 1846 all Central American products except coffee entered Britain duty free.”<sup>42</sup> Coffee, he continues, “soon received preferential treatment as well.”<sup>43</sup> Coffee exports received another boost with the completion of the Panama Railway in 1855, which was funded by the United States, as a move in the trans-isthmian transportation rivalry that had developed between the United States and Britain.<sup>44</sup> Costa Rica’s natural port lies on the Pacific side, so the Panama Railway provided a way to transport coffee to the Atlantic side of the isthmus.

Before coffee, this “land-rich, labor-starved society” consisted mostly of communal lands that even the wealthy did not bother to own.<sup>45</sup> However, Costa

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<sup>41</sup> Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., *Central America: A Nation Divided* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Latin American Histories Series (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 123.

<sup>42</sup> Woodward 128.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Woodward, 130-4.

<sup>45</sup> Lowell Gudmundson, “Peasant, Farmer, Proletarian: Class Formation in a Smallholder Coffee Economy, 1850-1950,” Eds. William Roseberry, Lowell Gudmundson, and Mario Samper Kutschbach (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995) 117.

Rica's rich volcanic soils and mountainous cloud forests created an ideal environment for growing high-quality coffee that could fetch a good price on the world market and approach name-brand status. Customers, especially the British, were willing to pay extra for the smooth, rich taste of Costa Rican coffee. According to Gudmundson, it was clear that coffee had become a priority in the country when cattle, crops besides coffee, and even "excess people" were marginalized from the land in favor of coffee.<sup>46</sup>

Due to this development, "Costa Rica adopted homesteading laws that offered clear title to any settlers that occupied national lands and planted coffee."<sup>47</sup> The opening of the Public Registry in 1864 saw a rapid application for titles to much of Costa Rica's land, which had previously been farmed communally, though possession of either money or connections lubricated the process.<sup>48</sup> While connections were useful, land rights were not such a source of conflict as in other Central American states. Gudmundson signals that division between the elite class and the peasantry was in place well before coffee, but that "landownership per se was not its defining characteristic or basis for power."<sup>49</sup> Instead, that power came mostly from ownership of the processing mills and access to markets, and as such, Paige uses the apt term "processing elite" to describe the elite class in coffeeed Costa Rica.<sup>50</sup> The peasantry

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<sup>46</sup> Gudmundson, "Class Formation," 117.

<sup>47</sup> William Roseberry, "Introduction," *Coffee, Society, and Power in Latin America*, Eds. William Roseberry, Lowell Gudmundson, and Mario Samper Kutschbach (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995) 16.

<sup>48</sup> Gudmundson, "Class Formation," 117.

<sup>49</sup> Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986) 67-8.

<sup>50</sup> Paige, 81. There is some flexibility in the terminology used to describe the powerful leaders of the coffee economy in Costa Rica. For more discussion regarding the structure of class divisions before and after the development of coffee, the following works are helpful. Jeffery Paige traces the

may have been able to obtain land rights, but they were still dependent on the elite for processing and export of their coffee.

The effects of the development of coffee as an export on the structure of Costa Rica's economy cannot be overestimated. Coffee created a situation where "those [peasants] who desired more could and did obtain more," even when this meant abandoning pre-coffee relationships with other peasants.<sup>51</sup> Titles to land parcels, normally of 12 *manzanas* or less were given out based on claims of previous settlement and cultivation, normally of coffee.<sup>52</sup> While coffee was not responsible for creating an elite class in Costa Rica, it did provide the whole of society "a spectacular increase in material wealth" and a means to "unify old and new wealth holders around an export commodity."<sup>53</sup> Class divisions in the early smallholding society were muted, but were clarified over time.<sup>54</sup> The smallholding society that dominated the coffee zone from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries and the

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development of the "coffee elite" in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Jeffery M. Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), specifically pages 53-95. Winson refers to the powerful class of coffee producers at the "coffee oligarchy." Anthony Winson, *Coffee and Democracy in Modern Costa Rica*, (New York: St. Martins, 1989) 2. Hall prefers to simply use the term "elite." Hall, *Costa Rica*, 75. Gudmundson recognizes a difference between the elite class and the peasantry, and examines the distinctions within each of these two heterogeneous classes. Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*, 67-87 and "Class Formation in a Smallholder Coffee Economy, 1850-1950, 119-20. Mario Samper Kutsbach also uses the term "coffee oligarchy," and says that during from 1920-1936, Costa Rica's coffee economy was controlled by "a rather cohesive, homogenous coffee elite." Mario Samper Kutsbach, "Colombian and Costa Rican Coffee Growers," *Coffee, Society, and Power in Latin America*, Eds. William Roseberry, Lowell Gudmundson, and Mario Samper Kutsbach (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1995) 166.

<sup>51</sup> Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Gudmundson. A *manzana* is a traditional quantitative term for describing land size in Central America. One *manzana* is equivalent to .69 hectares.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>54</sup> Gudmundson's study, "Class Formation in a Smallholder Coffee Economy, 1850-1950," provides a concise and thorough account of the development and effects of the smallholder society on the Costa Rican coffee industry.

relationships between coffee growers and coffee processors had great effects on the unique development of Costa Rica's coffee industry.

Costa Ricans had already begun to settle in the central valley before coffee was introduced. Though the population was sparse, coffee cultivation would increase migration to the area. The coffee industry in other Central American countries developed differently due to their own, distinct situations related to land distribution, population, and economic development. The coffee zone in El Salvador was in an area already densely settled from colonial and even pre-colonial times.<sup>55</sup> "Coffee production was organized on relatively large plantations, with wage labor, and under conditions that enriched only [the] elite," which were the same elites that governed the country.<sup>56</sup> As such, in a country with a weak legal system, the abuse of power in deals involving land access was "frequent."<sup>57</sup> El Salvador's coffee elite, still powerful today, is famously known as the "fourteen families."<sup>58</sup>

To a much greater extent than in Costa Rica, once the coffee industry took off, it contributed to a high concentration of wealth and power in El Salvador. However, historian Héctor Lindo-Fuentes points out that "the advance of coffee plantations took place gradually [in El Salvador]," because it was "at expense of ejidos and communal lands."<sup>59</sup> El Salvador already had a successful indigo export industry during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when coffee was becoming relevant in the region. Even though El Salvador

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<sup>55</sup> Roseberry, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>56</sup> Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, "The Economy of Central America: From Bourbon Reforms to Liberal Reforms," *Central America, 1821-1871: Liberalism before Liberal Reform* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1995) 48.

<sup>57</sup> Lindo-Fuentes 50-1.

<sup>58</sup> Paige, 18-9.

<sup>59</sup> Lindo-Fuentes 50-1.

began to export coffee in 1855, “indigo kept its advantage until the mid-1870s.”<sup>60</sup>

Thus, most of the country’s attention was not on developing the coffee industry until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Like in El Salvador, the coffee industry in Guatemala developed as a substitute for a previous export crop, cultivated with wage labor on plantations in areas of concentrated population;<sup>61</sup> in this case, the previous export crop was cochineal, a natural dye. Guatemala began to export coffee around 1859, when cochineal made up about 80 percent of exports.<sup>62</sup> Guatemala was able to sell cochineal to the British for use in the textile industry, until the discovery of a cheaper substitute in 1856.<sup>63</sup> Coffee’s share of total Guatemalan exports grew steadily from that year on, eventually replacing cochineal as the country’s chief export.<sup>64</sup>

Once again, in Guatemala like in El Salvador and Costa Rica, coffee and politics were intertwined. Lindo-Fuentes points out that “in a coincidence whose heavy symbolism has not escaped scores of historians, coffee’s share of total exports passed cochineal’s around 1871, the year of the great victory of Liberals over Conservatives.”<sup>65</sup> It was in 1871 that Liberal Miguel García Granados, who was an important military figure and coffee planter in Guatemala, Justo Rufino Barrios, who

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<sup>60</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, 43.

<sup>61</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, 48.

<sup>62</sup> Lindo Fuentes 43.

<sup>63</sup> Woodward, 131.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Lindo-Fuentes 43.

was also an important coffee planter, and Mexican Liberal Benito Juárez finally succeeded in overthrowing Guatemala's Conservative government.<sup>66</sup>

## Society and Political Change

All the while the coffee industry was developing in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Costa Rica was adjusting to statehood and slowly and quietly began developing characteristics to which later relative wealth and stability would be attributed: high literacy rates, nearly uninterrupted peaceful governance, and, eventually, the abolition of the military. Costa Rica, famously, “would eventually boast more teachers than soldiers.”<sup>67</sup> These “unique” qualities of Costa Rica are attributed to its “relative remoteness from the remainder of Central America, her slight economic importance to Spain, and her lack of a non-white subservient class and corresponding lack of a class of large landholders to exploit its labors.”<sup>68</sup> The country's first president, José María Castro was elected in 1847 and was responsible for inaugurating the University of Santo Tomás, establishing a newspaper, and founding a high-school for girls.<sup>69</sup> The powerful coffee barons forced him from power just two years later, and he was replaced by a coffee planter, Juan Rafael Mora.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Woodward, 153-4. Lindo-Fuentes 51.

<sup>67</sup> Woodward, 171.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>69</sup> Biesanz, et al., 19.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

Politically, the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of political skirmishes and demonstration of “coffee power.”<sup>71</sup> Colonel Tomás Guardia led a successful coup in 1871. He ruled with a strong hand and “curbed the power of the upper-class coffee barons.”<sup>72</sup> It was under the dictatorship of Guardia that the Atlantic Railroad was constructed, as well as public health programs and a continued emphasis on education, as started by Castro.<sup>73</sup> A second agricultural export, the banana trade was developing at this time. Its privileged presence in politics and the economy was related to negotiations for the construction of the railroad.<sup>74</sup>

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with economic crisis which threatened political turmoil. Coffee prices were low and the population was growing rapidly. In the midst of these problems, several contenders were vying for the presidency, which was eventually taken by Cleto González Víquez in 1906. After a series of relatively peaceful changes of power, Frederico and Joaquín Tinoco organized a successful coup in 1917, partly in response to the income tax imposed by President Alfredo González Flores.<sup>75</sup> The Tinocos did not maintain power for long, and the country returned to a tranquil state. However, as Biesanz et al. point out, this peaceful and tranquil state also meant maintaining many of the same conditions of poverty that the country had always been faced with. The seeds for communist ideas that would

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> It was Minor C. Keith, founder of the United Fruit Company, and his uncle John Meiggs that received the contract to build the Atlantic Railroad. Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 22.



dominate the 1930s political landscape and the political conflict of the 1940s began to germinate in this time period.

It was around the 1930s that class became politicized in a way that was meaningful to many Costa Ricans. The Communist Party was founded in Costa Rica in 1931. The non-elites of Costa Rica did not embrace communism in the manner that they did in many other countries at that time. Cooperatives have been important in the coffee market as a way to diffuse socio-economic tensions, employed because of their resonance with certain internal factors, such as a distaste amongst the coffee elite for orthodox communist ideas.<sup>76</sup> However, Costa Rican communism was a modified communism that was less militant than the version popular in El Salvador, where class distinctions were much more repressive for the rural proletariat.<sup>77</sup>

Communism in 1930s Costa Rica, famously represented by Manuel Mora Valverde, “asserted the positions of those left out of the Liberal narrative of order and progress.”<sup>78</sup> Costa Rican communists were elected to power and enjoyed wide support, except within the ranks of the coffee elite. The Communist Party even adapted its goals to fit the political and cultural climate of the country.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Paige, 102. Cooperatives have certainly not been limited to the coffee industry in Costa Rica. In addition to agricultural cooperatives of all kinds, including banana, milk, rice, and cane production, and cooperatives that produce other agricultural products, savings and loan cooperatives have been important. Savings and loan cooperatives have often provided financing for projects undertaken by the production cooperatives. Additionally, many cooperatives participate in a variety of enterprises, including production of more than one commodity, running a savings and loan, and maintaining one or more stores. The best general book on agricultural cooperatives in Costa Rica is Jorge A. Mora Alfaro, *Cooperativismo y Desarrollo Agrario*, (San José: U Estatal a Distancia, 1987).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>79</sup> The communists in Costa Rica quickly came to understand that the climate was not right to talk of a full-scale revolution.

Beginning with the presidency of Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia, Costa Rica evolved into a social-democratic state with a growing societal aversion to communist organization, and an institutional and social infrastructure designed to support agricultural production cooperatives. Calderón began this movement by enacting the Social Guarantees, which, among other reforms that were not related to coffee, excused smallholder coffee producers from paying most taxes and developed a plan to set a minimum coffee price. The reforms were popular, and many Costa Ricans including the communists were enthusiastic.<sup>80</sup> During his presidency, Calderón, who was well-educated and sympathetic to the lower class, began the process of social reform and passed the reform act known as the Social Guarantees, though it was Figueres' *Partido Liberación Nacional*, or the National Liberation Party (PLN) that cemented the creation of a social security system, a national health plan, an eight-hour workday, and laws allowing unions.<sup>81</sup>

Calderón ruled from 1940 to 1944, while the communist Soviet Union was fighting Nazi Germany in Europe, and a time when it was not considered by most Central Americans to be in ill-taste to be communist. Calderón came to rely on the Communist Party for support, when his elite traditional support base became eroded in response to his progressive reforms. Despite its rather tame mode of operation in comparison with other communist parties that were planning revolutions, popular opposition to the party grew, as it was seen as a force potentially destructive to the “rural egalitarianism, harmony, and social peace” so valued by Costa Ricans,

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<sup>80</sup> Winson, 42.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 133-4.

especially in the coffee sector.<sup>82</sup> His plan alienated his traditional support base, the wealthy coffee producers, however, and he was accused of having both communist and dictatorial tendencies at a time when communism was going out of fashion, and was exiled after a nearly bloodless revolution led by Figueres in 1948.

Anti-communist feelings came to a head in the 1940s as a result of the policies of Calderón. His Social Guarantees had alienated his traditional support base, the wealthy coffee producers,<sup>83</sup> while at the same time failing to garner the support he needed in the laboring classes. In the absence of support from other sectors of the electorate, and drawing on his own deeply held values of social-justice and Catholic beliefs,<sup>84</sup> Calderón had little choice but to rely on the support of the Catholic Church and the Communists. This unlikely alliance set the stage for Calderón, amidst public outcry that he was both a communist and dictatorial, to be ousted by a *junta*, or ruling committee, led by Figueres.<sup>85</sup> Widespread opposition to communism began, and in many ways, became institutionalized in the national character in the 1940s under Figueres and the PLN, most notably by Figueres' banning of the party in 1948.<sup>86</sup>

Winson points out that the very fact that Caderón went to the Communists for support indicates how weak the traditional coffee-power base had become. The non-elites in the coffee industry had grown fed-up with the elite-driven power structure

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 149; Gudmundson, "Class Formation," 114.

<sup>83</sup> Winson, 42, 48.

<sup>84</sup> Paige, 142-4.

<sup>85</sup> Some authors, including Woodward, have chosen not to refer to the change of power in Costa Rica in 1948 as a revolution because it was not started from the bottom of society, filtering up, as revolutions have been traditionally considered. Other authors, including Paige, have used the alternate description of civil war to describe the event.

<sup>86</sup> Paige, 101.

and “it was evident that in the future the old ruling circles could no longer rely on their old system of patron-client relations in the countryside, together with systemic electoral fraud and corruption, to maintain their influence over the State.”<sup>87</sup> The coffee elite placed their support behind Calderón’s challenger, Figueres.

However, Figueres’ reforms turned out to be even more progressive than the ones enacted by Calderón, and included provisions for free elections, equal rights for women, the abolition of the army, an independent judicial system, as well as prohibiting the reelection of a president for eight years, though they also included the outlawing of communist parties.<sup>88</sup> Part of these reforms entailed the development of state support mechanisms for cooperatives, especially as an antidote to syndicalism and a way to support the working class while not alienating the wealthy. The wealthy coffee producers that supported Figueres’ campaign against Calderón have ended up paying for the majority of these reforms, creating some amount of animosity between classes. The general stability and improvement in economic conditions that resulted from the reforms has probably been to the benefit of all Costa Ricans.

During Figueres’ rule following the civil war, he began to make sweeping reforms to the country, creating an extensive welfare state. Ironically, Figueres’ reforms were much more socialist than Calderón had likely ever imagined. Besides dissolving the army and strengthening the police force as the body charged with protecting the country, he nationalized the banks, placed taxes on the wealthy, established COOCAFE, the Consortium of Coffee Cooperatives of Guanacaste &

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 227.

Montes de Oro, and other organizations to promote agricultural development, and drafted a new constitution. His progressive constitution was rejected by the Constituent Assembly, Costa Rica's elected legislative body, but the constitution that was approved turned out to be nearly as progressive as Figueres' original draft. It provided for free elections, equal rights for women, confirmed the abolition of the army, and created an independent judicial system, as well as prohibiting the reelection of a president for eight years following his or her term and outlawing communist parties,<sup>89</sup> though the progressiveness of this last reform is questionable.

Some authors, including Anthony Winson, laud Figueres for his actions, saying that they served to “[secure] the economic prosperity of the country in the short and medium term,”<sup>90</sup> although the elite class' reaction to these reforms has been ambivalent at best. Ironically, the wealthy who had supported Figueres in opposition to the socialist reforms of Calderón were the very people that ended up paying for Figueres' reforms most and benefiting directly from them least. However, the general stability and improvement in economic conditions that resulted from the reforms has been to the benefit of all Costa Ricans. Recent attempts at neo-liberal reform notwithstanding, these policies have been a central aspect of Costa Rican social policy since the 1940s. Many people oppose one part of the policy or another, but accept these conditions as a necessary trade-off for the general well-being they perceive themselves to have.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>90</sup> Winson, 8.

By far the most controversial of the reforms was the nationalization of the banks,<sup>91</sup> and the banking system has now returned to a mixed private-public system in attempt to appease every socio-economic class. The large-scale producers and some laborers are still in favor of some of the reforms made by Figueres for no other reason than the social stability the country has enjoyed since then.<sup>92</sup> However, the traditional elite of the coffee industry, among others, seem to long for the relatively moderate reforms made under Calderón.<sup>93</sup> These reforms have done little to treat the problems of the growing landless and impoverished population. By rejecting communism and the class-awareness that necessarily goes along with it, Costa Rican society has blinded itself to the notion of class conflict, ignoring the needs of a significant population.

### Cooperatives and the Role of the State in Coffee Production

Coffee is a product that requires considerable amounts of physical labor to harvest. The cherries that encase coffee beans are delicate, and cherries in the same bunch ripen at different times. Thus, due to the careful way in high-quality coffee must be harvested, there is no effective machine that can replace human hands in the picking process. Unlike some industries, such as the petroleum industry, where relatively little human contact with the product is required to create an acceptable final result, the human hands that tend to, pick, and process coffee are crucial to the

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<sup>91</sup> Paige, 254-8.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 322-6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

quality of the final product. In Costa Rica, 750,000 people, or about one-fifth of the population, rely on coffee production to make a living during at least part of the year, making the industry a high priority of the government of Costa Rica,<sup>94</sup> in spite of the fact that coffee exports have diminished as a portion of the national product. It is logical that a state would have a high level of interest in an industry in which such a significant amount of its population is involved. This may be especially true when that industry has a market as volatile as that of coffee.<sup>95</sup>

The cooperative movement is strong in the Costa Rican coffee industry. Around one-third of Costa Rican coffee is cooperative-produced, a hefty percentage when one considers that elsewhere in Central America the percentages of cooperative produced coffee run much lower.<sup>96</sup> The cooperative movement in Costa Rica experienced its most significant growth from the 1950s to the 1970s. In 1952 there were only 20 cooperatives in Costa Rica, with a total of 2556 members, and by 1983 there were 407 cooperatives with more than 200,000 members.<sup>97</sup> Growth of the

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<sup>94</sup> Cafédirect. "Costa Rica," *Cafédirect*, [http://www.cafedirect.co.uk/growers/costa\\_rica.php](http://www.cafedirect.co.uk/growers/costa_rica.php), (accessed 27 March 2005).

<sup>95</sup> Coffee prices have been historically volatile. Between 1976 and 2005, prices of the "other mild arabicas" group in which Costa Rican coffee is found, have ranged from a low of less than 53 US cents per pound in 1992 to a high price of \$3.17 per pound in 1977. International Coffee Organization, "Historical Data," ICO, <http://www.ico.org/asp/display10.asp> (accessed October 23, 2005).

<sup>96</sup> More precise data is difficult to obtain, due perhaps to a lack of governmental recognition of cooperativization within the coffee industry in other countries. Moreover, research on cooperativization and "fair trade" tends to focus on the consumption end of the commodity chain or the benefits that the individual farmer receives not aggregate production statistics.

<sup>97</sup> Co-operative Development League Ltd., *Las cooperativas en el desarrollo rural*, Documentos de investigación (S.A.: EDICOSTA, n.d.) 59

cooperative sector continued, although less rapidly, through the 1980s and as of 1992, there were 562 cooperatives with over 360,000 members registered in Costa Rica.<sup>98</sup>

Cooperative farmers have a high stake in the success of their own crops as well as the market as a whole, even though they may have needed support from the state to arrive at that place. A high volume of product is crucial to have leverage in the market: by supporting cooperatives, the state is helping farmers help themselves. Benefits of successful cooperatives are plentiful, exceed economic benefits, and may even be necessary for some members to maintain a certain quality of life. This is especially true when membership in a successful cooperative prevents a family from having to rely on other state resources such as welfare programs for their livelihood.

Costa Rica's formation into a place for both coffee and cooperatives can be partially attributed to a history that created unique class relations there. It may be that Costa Rica has, on the whole and by a unique twist of fate, escaped the reality of ample exportable natural resources and labor that are generally considered to be blessings and that have in many ways plagued other Latin American countries. Without these "blessings" on which to rely, the inhabitants of Costa Rica have had to be resourceful in creating situations in which they could turn a profit. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, other countries in the region were creating a class of elites to control the money and a class of workers to make the products for elites to sell. Elites under the typical economic system that favored them created jobs and workers competed for them, driving down wages in the process. This is how the United States and Europe

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<sup>98</sup> Marielos Rojas Viquez, Luz Cubero and Lorena Campos, *Anuario sobre el cooperativismo en Costa Rica 1990-1991*. (San Jose: U de Costa Rica, 1991) 19.



developed and if Latin America were following the same formula, conventional wisdom suggested that it could only mean good things for those economies as well.

Such was not the case in Costa Rica. As discussed above, Costa Ricans were beset with the unique problem of having an excess of farmable land, so much so that its residents, even the wealthy ones, did not bother to own it until the middle-to-end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>99</sup> Finding workers was both so costly and so difficult that small farmers seldom went to the trouble of planting any more than they and their own family members could harvest. Some of the wealthier settlers, especially the blue-blooded but relatively low-ranked royalty that settled in the area, wanted to flaunt their wealth but were unable to do so by acquiring vast amounts of land, save by securing their affluence by owning and running the *beneficios*, or processing plants for coffee. Large plantations existed, but not to the exclusion of smaller plots owned by middle and lower class families.

Many authors writing on the subject of coffee in Costa Rica have cited the notion of rural democracy tied to coffee production, which insinuates that the introduction of coffee in the region created the necessary conditions for most Costa Ricans to have access to land. The works of Jeffrey Paige and Lowell Gudmundson in particular have scrutinized the degree of truth of a coffee-tied rural democracy and the degree to which land-ownership among those in the coffee producing industry minimized class distinctions. The belief, especially amongst the coffee elite, in “rural egalitarianism, harmony, and social peace,” brought about at least partially by coffee

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<sup>99</sup> Gudmundson, 117.

farming, was formative in the decisions made by the elite when faced with changing state social and economic policies.<sup>100</sup>

State support of producer cooperatives in the coffee industry, as well as other elements of social welfare created and maintained by the state, have helped perpetuate these myths: that Costa Ricans are wealthy, not just wealthier than their Central American neighbors, and that they live in a more or less classless, egalitarian society in the countryside. Statistics paint a different picture, however. In 2004 a full 21 percent of the population was reported to be living below the poverty line,<sup>101</sup> lending credence to the claims of those that point to a growing landless class of wage laborers that falls between the cracks of many of the social welfare programs.

The issue of class or classlessness during the development of Costa Rica is one that has been the focus of considerable debate. As mentioned in the introduction, there are essentially two camps regarding this matter. Hall downplays the role of class in the coffee producing sector of society, which for much of Costa Rica's history was the principle sector of society.<sup>102</sup> Paige, Seligson, and Winston emphasize the existence of classes in the rural, coffee-producing sector, or at least the existence of distinctions within the single landed-class.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Paige, 149.

<sup>101</sup> "Costa Rica," 2004 Index of Economic Freedom, The Heritage Foundation, 2004, <http://cf.heritage.org/index2004test/country2.cfm?id=CostaRica>. (accessed on May 7, 2005).

<sup>102</sup> Carolyn Hall, *El Café y el Desarrollo Histórico-Geográfico*.

<sup>103</sup> Paige, 85-7; Seligson 15-7; Winson, "Class Structure and Agrarian Transition in Central America," *Latin American Perspectives* 5 (autumn 1978) 32.

Agro-industrial elites and small- and medium-holders favored, or at least only expressed ambivalence toward cooperation,<sup>104</sup> but it is worth noting that communists in Costa Rica scorned production cooperation, seeing it simply as “*charlatanismo*.”<sup>105</sup> Ultimately, this rivalry helped fashion the favorable position of cooperatives in Costa Rican society. Indeed, despite attempts at cooperation by communist countries like Cuba and the Soviet Union, animosity developed and continues to exist in Costa Rica between proponents of cooperation and proponents of the syndicalism that was promoted by the communists.

As Gudmundson points out, coffee smallholders, like the elites in their industry, became anti-labor and anti-communist.<sup>106</sup>

[They] sought both to defeat labor-based political movements and to preempt their program for societal transformation, employing [...] liberalism and state support for a coffee producers’ cooperative movement. The importance of such antileft, petty-bourgeois reformism in the cold war era can hardly be overestimated.<sup>107</sup>

Cooperation gained support from farmers and acceptance from elites because it was a less threatening form of organization than some others, including communist labor unions. If people were going to organize anyway, Costa Ricans preferred cooperation because it promoted capitalist and democratic values. Paige, quoting historian John

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<sup>104</sup> “Su grado de desarrollo va de acuerdo con el grado de desarrollo democrático y cultural de una sociedad.” Marjorie de Oduber, *El cooperativismo como instrumento de desarrollo en Costa Rica*, (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), 1.

<sup>105</sup> José D Cazanga S, *Las cooperativas de caficultores en Costa Rica* (Ciudad Universitaria Rodrigo Facio: Alma Mater, 1987) 49. Italics added.

<sup>106</sup> Gudmundson, “Class Formation,” 114.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

Patrick Bell, points out that “communism...came to be perceived as ‘a challenge to the nation’s heritage of stability, order, and peaceful solutions to conflicts.’”<sup>108</sup>

Though popular in the previous decade, by the 1940s, “in Costa Rica anti-communism was a product of class collaboration and ideological unity.”<sup>109</sup> However, the ideas of the communists regarding social welfare were retained.

Cooperativization as an alternative to socialist style syndicalism that addressed social concerns while operating within the context of capitalism made sense given the long, revered history of democracy in Costa Rica. Paige even suggests that for some people in the coffee industry, particularly elites, anti-communist ideals are so strong that they see them as an aspect of “Costa Rican national character rather than [...] a personal crusade.”<sup>110</sup> Moreover, both elites and peasants preferred cooperation to communism as a form of peasant organization thanks to the stability it provided.<sup>111</sup>

Part of the reason for the proliferation of cooperatives in the country was the support the movement received from the Costa Rican government. In 1943, the Social Guarantees Act was passed, which contained the first legislative support of cooperativization. According to Cazanga, the law’s purpose was to “promote the harmonization of the interests of different social classes situated in different positions in a liberal economy.”<sup>112</sup> To appease peasants that were demanding land rights and

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<sup>108</sup> Paige 132.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 247-8.

<sup>112</sup> “promover la armonización de iintreses de las distintas clases sociales situadad en distintas posiciones en una economía liberal.” Cazanga, 22.

chances to earn a higher standard of living while at the same time maintaining the status of the landed upper classes, the reforms provided loans and tax breaks to peasants and re-appropriated underused land to the peasants for cooperative formation but left alone any land that was being utilized for production purposes. The history of democratically elected governments and neutrality in world affairs led Costa Ricans to favor less controversial and potentially divisive forms of organization. Cooperatives worked within the established framework of democracy while communist organizations threatened it.

Opposition to socialist labor movements by members of the cooperative movement in Costa Rica also may be one reason United States President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress program in the 1960's promoted cooperatives as a way to bring order to the region as it was beset with agrarian unrest.<sup>113</sup> According to Paige, the Alliance for Progress initiated efforts to "[fight] communism at its social and economic roots."<sup>114</sup> Both the United States and liberals in Costa Rica saw a strong cooperative movement as an antidote to the threat of communism in Central America and promoted it accordingly. To many, these reforms have not been enough and may have served a mere bandage on a much bigger problem, as a growing number of Costa Ricans live landless and below the poverty line.

Support for the cooperative movement by the state has acted as a form of social security for the quite significant part of Costa Rican society involved in such endeavors. The coffee industry, as the first successful source of wealth in the country

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<sup>113</sup> Sick, 31.

<sup>114</sup> Paige, 260.

beginning in the early 19th century,<sup>115</sup> has been nurtured by the state since its independence in 1821. Under Figueres, cooperatives became the “social infrastructures” that were meant to ensure a higher standard of living for the participants in this section of the Costa Rican economy.<sup>116</sup> As de Oduber points out, the Costa Rican government has seen the effectiveness of cooperatives and sponsors legislation, like the “social infrastructures,” to stimulate and maintain this sector.<sup>117</sup> She does not state how cooperatives are effective, but later mentions that 35 percent of the coffee crop is produced by cooperatives.<sup>118</sup> One can presume that producing over a third of the country’s coffee crop may be evidence of some sort of effectiveness of cooperatives.

While cooperatives seem to have enjoyed remarkable success in Costa Rica’s favorable cultural, political, and economic environment, not everything about the cooperative system has been rosy. For instance, even with the large production output in coffee, many cooperatives fail due to poor business planning, rifts between members and a general lack of enthusiasm.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, even a cooperative successful in terms of remaining in business and producing profits for its members may cause conflict within communities by dividing the community into member and non-member groups, as documented by Geographer Tad Mutersbaugh with regards to

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<sup>115</sup> Seligson, 39-46.

<sup>116</sup> The term “social infrastructure” is taken from David Harvey, *Limits to Capital*. New Ed. (London: Verso, 1999) 404.

<sup>117</sup> de Oduber, 1.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>119</sup> Walter S. Quesada, *Las cooperativas agrícolas en Costa Rica*, ([San José]: Banco Nacional de Costa Rica Departamento de Cooperativas Sección de Publicaciones y Divulgación SE-6, 1968), 7.

organic coffee.<sup>120</sup> Joining an alternative trade organization, like an organic and/or fair-trade certified cooperative, as most cooperatives in the world are, is expensive and time consuming.<sup>121</sup>

For these reasons, as well as general skepticism of the concept of cooperativization and lack of desire, many farmers are left out of the cooperative system and miss out on the benefits, creating divisions and tension in communities. Some farmers simply cannot afford the time and money required to join a cooperative, and others have seen them fail or feel that they can make more money with less work by selling their coffee to a private *beneficio*. Regardless of these drawbacks, the Costa Rican state continues to actively support the cooperative sector, apparently seeing the benefits of cooperatives as outweighing the drawbacks associated with them. More important, however, is the notion of development and democracy being tied to a notion of rural egalitarianism. A thriving production cooperative sector is proof of economic and cultural development, as well as a way to “strengthen [the position of] the lower-class.”<sup>122</sup>

## Conclusions

Coffee has played a crucial role in the historical development of Costa Rica since it became a viable source of income in the 1840s. Not only has it played an

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<sup>120</sup> Tad Mutersbaugh, “The Number is the Beast: A Political Economy of Organic-Coffee Certification and Producer Unionism,” *Environment and Planning*, (2002): 1165-1184.

<sup>121</sup> Costa Rica is a different case, however, regarding fair-trade and organic certification. Relatively few coffee cooperatives in Costa Rica have an international certification, because the cooperatives were established before certification became widely used. However, the deterrents listed to joining a cooperative are largely valid for those cooperatives without certification as well.

<sup>122</sup> “fortalecer la población de menores recursos.” de Oduber, 2.

important role in Costa Rican economic growth; the presence of coffee can be found in nearly every political development as well. The events of the 1940s and the ensuing reforms proved to have lasting effects Costa Rican society, including coffee production. The history of coffee in Costa Rica has created a national societal association with coffee and given Costa Rica an international reputation as a coffee place.



### **Chapter 3. Coffee as an Expression of Costa Rican Identity**

Each year more than 15 billion pounds of coffee are consumed, and of that amount, approximately 370 million pounds of it is Costa Rican coffee.<sup>123</sup> Tiny Costa Rica still produces nearly two and a half percent of the world's coffee, even at a time when prices have been at a historical low and other products and tourism are becoming more important in the Costa Rican economy. In the face of these obstacles, farming families, many of whom have grown coffee for generations, continue producing it even when they cannot make a living off of it. Moreover, consumers continue demanding coffee from Costa Rica, and they are often willing to pay premium prices to get it. Costa Rica is associated with coffee, by Costa Ricans and by people from outside of Costa Rica.

The focus of this chapter is to examine the observable ways in which the coffeeness of Costa Rica has been and is manifested. The identity of Costa Ricans is tied up in the country's history as a coffee producer and as a coffee consumer. Though Costa Rica exports far more coffee than it maintains for domestic consumption, coffee consumption is an important part of Costa Rican life. Just taking into account the volume of coffee consumed, in 1999 each Costa Rican consumed 8 kilograms of coffee, second only to Brazil in amount of coffee consumed by a Latin American country.<sup>124</sup> Coffee has been present in Costa Rica in social relationships between individuals, the negotiation of class formation and definition, Costa Rica's

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<sup>123</sup> Commodity Research Bureau.

<sup>124</sup> Vega, 3.

economy and its positioning in the world market, its politics, and its cultural expressions. It is instructive to examine the manners in which Costa Ricans have expressed their national identity as inhabitants of a coffee place.

## Coffee, Economics, and Identity

In a geographic sense, what makes us human is our necessity for, and continuous creation of, place. Sack defines place simply as an “area or region,” that is, a territory.<sup>125</sup> A place can be any size; for the purposes of this study, it is a country. As a territory, place also has rules about what occurs within its boundaries. This paper explores the way that Costa Rica is a coffee place, which is one approach to exploring the connection of Costa Rican identity with coffee. A history of political and economic developments, physical realities, and ideas about what it means to be Costa Rican have created a place that together help create a unique Costa Rican identity.

Coffee’s importance in the economic development of Costa Rica can hardly be overestimated. The bean was “supposedly” first introduced in Costa Rica around 1790,<sup>126</sup> though the exact year of its introduction is unknown. It was primarily cultivated for domestic consumption by some sectors of the population,<sup>127</sup> until coffee production began to develop as an important export commodity between the 1820s

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<sup>125</sup> Sack, *Homo Geographicus*, 31. This book outlines a framework for understanding how places are constructed, and how they are interconnected. The framework is meant to help the reader synthesize seemingly disparate ideas into an understanding rooted in Geography and to understand moral implications of human action.

<sup>126</sup> Theodore S. Creedman, *Historical Dictionary of Costa Rica*, (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1977) 45.

<sup>127</sup> Vega, 8.

and 1840s.<sup>128</sup> Though it was possible to produce exceptionally high quality coffee in Costa Rica due to the favorable growing conditions there, coffee was somewhat of an emerging market and its growth into a lucrative commodity occurred over a period of thirty to fifty years.

When coffee first became established in the market, few farmers were able to make a living growing exclusively coffee.<sup>129</sup> The turning point for coffee prosperity was 1845, when a “firmer linkage with the English market was established with the efforts of the merchant captain Lacheur.”<sup>130</sup> The coffee market was further aided by the construction of the Carretera Nacional in the 1840s, which was essentially an ox-cart road to from the coffee zone to the Pacific port at the Golfo Dulce, and the completion of the railroad to the Atlantic in the 1870s.<sup>131</sup> With the combination of these factors, “Costa Rica, as a State, begins to be associated with the coffee” in 1873, according to Vega.<sup>132</sup> Monge concurs the importance of coffee to Costa Rican economic development, saying “it is indisputable that the rapid development of coffee

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<sup>128</sup> The exact decade in which coffee production became important in the Costa Rican economy is the subject of some dispute in the literature, ranging from the decade of the 1820s to the 1840s. The discrepancy is likely attributable to different standards for what it means to have become an “important” export product. The following are a selection of works that assert production became notable in each decade. 1820s: Woodward, 96. Sampter, 153. 1830s: Winson, *Coffee & Democracy* 10. Creedman, 45. 1940s: Carolyn Hall, *Costa Rica* 74. Sick, 10. Vega straddles the divide, noting that development of the product for export occurred during the 20 years between 1820 and 1840. Vega, 3, 8, 246.

<sup>129</sup> Vega, 246.

<sup>130</sup> Winson, 10.

<sup>131</sup> Samper, 153.

<sup>132</sup> Vega, 213.

cultivation should be considered the principal economic event in Costa Rica of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>133</sup>

Even though coffee’s share in total Costa Rican exports has fallen drastically since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was at its peak importance, it remains a crucial agricultural export. Beginning in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when coffee first became important, and for the next 50 years, it was “virtually, Costa Rica’s only export.”<sup>134</sup> In 1930, during the coffee crisis that occurred as a result of the Great Depression, coffee made up more than 50 percent of the country’s exports and 25 percent of the population lived on coffee fincas.<sup>135</sup> As late as the 1950s, as much as 50% of the country’s income was from the sale of coffee.<sup>136</sup> In 1976, coffee made up 27.6 percent of exports. Today, around 10 percent of Costa Rica’s exports are coffee,<sup>137</sup> and about 20 percent of the population works in coffee during at least part of the year.<sup>138</sup> Recent fluctuations in coffee prices have driven some farmers to abandon their bushes for other jobs. Thus, the actual volume of coffee produced has decreased.<sup>139</sup> However, between the mid-19th and the mid-20th century, coffee output steadily increased, and after 1950, intensified cultivation tripled the amount of coffee exported.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Carlos Monge Alfaro, *Historia de Costa Rica*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Fondo de Cultura de Costa Rica, 1951) 215.

<sup>134</sup> Hall, 75.

<sup>135</sup> Vega, 215.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Aguilar and Klocker, 595.

<sup>138</sup> Cafédirect.

<sup>139</sup> The mid 1980s saw a stagnation in the total amount of coffee produced in Costa Rica. FAO, “World Crop and Livestock Statistics, 1948-1985,” <http://www.fao.org/es/ess/historical/Default.aspx>, (accessed 6 December 2005).

<sup>140</sup> Hall, 75.

Vega points out that “coffee is, at least in the six decades between 1870 and 1930, the principal motor of agro-export growth of the Central American economy in general and the Costa Rican economy in particular.”<sup>141</sup> As indicated by the data above, coffee cultivation and exportation was an important activity in the Costa Rican economy. Moreover, the prosperity created by this coffee has not been reserved solely for a handful of producer families, as famously has been the case in Nicaragua and El Salvador,<sup>142</sup> and to an even greater extent, Guatemala.<sup>143</sup> Coffee, in Costa Rica, “was considered the perfect product to incite change, prosperity, and to facilitate change.”<sup>144</sup> Indeed, Costa Rica has a higher standard of living than its Central American neighbors, which has become more exaggerated with the passage of time.<sup>145</sup> (See Table 1)

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<sup>141</sup> “pues el café es, por lo menos en las seis décadas que se ubican entre 1870 y 1930, el principal motor del crecimiento agroexportador de la economía centroamericana en general y de la costarricense en particular.” Vega, 211.

<sup>142</sup> The fictional “fourteen families” of El Salvador and the civil war there, as well as the civil war in Nicaragua have called popular attention to the history of land disparity in these coffee-producing countries. Héctor Pérez Brignoli, “The 1932 Rebellion in El Salvador,” *Coffee, Society, and Power in Latin America*, William Roseberry, et al., eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) 244. Paige, 62.

<sup>143</sup> Paige, 60-2. In 1966-7, integrated producers, defined by Paige as those “with enough land so that they are likely to also control more than one farm and own a mill processing their own and other growers’ coffee,” and estate producers that “have hired a manager as well as hired labor and control enough land to permit an aristocratic life style” controlled 83.7% of Guatemalan coffee land, and produced 79.5% of the country’s green coffee. Integrated producers and estate producers controlled only 53.7% of El Salvador’s coffee land, and 52.8% of Nicaragua’s. These large producers produced 58.1% and 64.2% of El Salvador and Nicaragua’s green coffee that year, respectively. In Costa Rica, “sub-family,” “family,” and “small employer” farmers owned the majority of the land and produced the majority of the coffee. Only 30.6% of land was owned by integrated and estate producers, and only 37.5% of green coffee was produced by integrated and estate producers.

<sup>144</sup> “se considera el producto por excelencia que conduce al cambio, a la prosperidad, pero también el que facilita la transmutación.” Vega, 212.

<sup>145</sup> For the purposes of this paper, and often in the literature, Central America is considered to include the five countries that were originally a part of the United Provinces of Central America. Panama and Belize are also located on the Central American Isthmus and share some history and geographic characteristics with the other five countries, but are generally not included in this discussion. Coffee is grown in Panama, and does not play an important role Belize.

Table 1  
Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in US Dollars  
of Central American Countries\*

	Costa Rica	Nicaragua	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras
1912	\$76	\$54	\$39	\$65	\$67
1970	\$1,537.40	\$1,329.80	\$1,218.60	\$794.60	\$503.00
1994	\$2,048.10	\$579.00	\$1,192.00	\$896.50	\$592.70

Source: 1912: Table A.2.1. “The ration of exports to GDP, w, 1850 and 1912 (based on current prices, in US\$), *The Economic History of Latin America since Independence*, Victor Bulmer-Thomas, p. 420. 1970 and 1994: Table 4. “Gross Domestic Product and Urban Population (1960-95), *Central America: A Nation Divided*, by Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr.

\*some discrepancy in the figures given for 1912 versus the figures given for 1970 and 1994 exists, because of the differences in the value of the US dollar used by the two sources. However, for the purposes of comparing countries across the same year, the figures given are sufficient.

The disparity in GDP per capita between different Central American countries can be attributed to several factors, including political developments, characteristics of the physical environment, and changes in social organization.<sup>146</sup> It was during the 1930s, when coffee prices were low, that the Instituto de Defensa del Café (now ICAFE) “took charge of coming up with strategies to promote [coffee].”<sup>147</sup> Some strategies included *juegos florales*, or public poetry competitions, to encourage the production of poetry and other art referencing coffee, and publishing supplements

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<sup>146</sup> This paper will not attempt to delineate all of the reasons for Costa Rica’s relative wealth over its neighbors. For works that contribute in a more significant way to that project, see for example Woodward, *Central America: A Nation Divided*. Richard Biesanz, et al., *The Costa Ricans*. Lowell Gudmundson and Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, *Central America, 1821-1871: Liberalism before Liberal Reform*, (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama, 1995).

<sup>147</sup> “el Instituto de Defensa del Café se encarga de idear estrategias para promocionarlo.” Vega, 215.

featuring works from the *juegos florales* in *La Tribuna*.<sup>148</sup> These supplements were created for national circulation to celebrate coffee as “our national product.”<sup>149</sup> Vega notes that “the goal of the editors [of the supplements] is that, through a review of the cultivation, the history, the literature, and the preparation of coffee, there will exist “a better understanding of ourselves.”<sup>150</sup>

The intertwining of coffee and the arts in Costa Rica has left a lasting mark on Costa Rican culture, beyond the collective memory and newspaper archives. A tax on coffee exports famously financed the construction of the Teatro Nacional, or the National Theatre. This Baroque-Rocco style theatre was afforded by the government by taxing 20 centavos on each 100 pounds of coffee exported, and cost over two million colons.<sup>151</sup> Construction began on the theatre in 1890, when significant coffee revenues were available thanks to development of the coffee industry after construction of the railroad several years before. Dedicated in 1897, the theatre is an impressive testament to the importance of coffee sales to Costa Rica and Costa Rican culture.

The importance of coffee in the Costa Rican economy is further attested to by the existence and influence of the official governmental organization, the Instituto del Café (Coffee Institute), or ICAFE as it is called. Formed as the Instituto de Defensa del Café (Coffee Defense Institute) in 1933 during a collapse in coffee and other

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> “nuestro producto nacional.” *Suplemento La Tribuna, Homenaje al café de Costa Rica*, October 1933, 1, qtd. in Vega, 215.

<sup>150</sup> “El propósito de los editores es que, a través de un recorrido por la siembra, la historia, la literatura y la preparación del café, exista ‘un mejor conocimiento de nosotros mismos.’” Vega, 215. Quotation within from *Suplemento La Tribuna*, 1, qtd. in Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Creedman, 194.

commodity prices, the organization worked to regulate coffee prices within Costa Rica and promote the crop as an instrument to Costa Rican economic success.<sup>152</sup> Besides initiatives to encourage domestic consumption and adoption of coffee as “our national product,” ICAFE is highly important in regulating nearly every aspect of the industry. ICAFE sets minimum prices paid to farmers by *beneficios*, inspects and grades coffee qualities, represents Costa Rica in the international coffee market and even “ensures that all coffee farmers have access to credit.”<sup>153</sup> On the other hand, all this governmental support may simply mean that “coffee is less profitable than it seems at first glance,” due to the hidden costs involved in maintaining the industry.<sup>154</sup>

Perhaps one of the most important actions taken by ICAFE was the banning of the heartier coffee species *robusta*, in favor of the *arabica* species that is grown in Costa Rica and used for most premium coffees. This was done, in the words of the Minister of Agriculture, “in the interest of maintaining the quality and prestige of our [Costa Rican] coffee.”<sup>155</sup> This is highly instructive to Costa Rican attitudes concerning pride in the quality of their coffee, and continues to be an issue today with increasing external pressures from international companies to market coffee with less emphasis on quality.

On a recent trip to Costa Rica, I was afforded the unique opportunity of participating in a *manifestación*, or demonstration, with various coffee cooperative representatives from across the country, to encourage ICAFE to decide to maintain

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<sup>152</sup> The name change came about later, but the general purpose of the organization did not change.

<sup>153</sup> Sick, 28-9.

<sup>154</sup> John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, *Costa Rican Life* (New York: Colombia UP, 1944) 133.

<sup>155</sup> Sick, 29.



the prohibition on growing and selling robusta coffee in Costa Rica. I traveled to San José with Guillermo Vargas Leiton, the manager of Coopesanta Elena, R.L. and three other members of the cooperative to this *manifestación*. An illegal cargo container full of robusta coffee smuggled in by one of the main commercial coffee companies, Café Rey, was discovered in the port city of Limón. Allowing lower quality, cheaper and less labor intensive robusta coffee to be produced and sold in Costa Rica would threaten the existence of many small-holder farmers and cooperatives, which produce smaller quantities of higher-priced, higher-quality Arabica coffee. This issue is of such pertinence that within three days, coffee cooperatives in Costa Rica recruited enough of their members to go to San José for the *manifestación* to fill the parking lot of the ICAFE building.<sup>156</sup>

Coffee has an important presence in Costa Rica related to its position in the economy. A pervasive idea exists that “coffee is not just the golden bean, but it is also responsible for the wellbeing, and thus, the peace of being Costa Rican.”<sup>157</sup> Beginning after 1820 when coffee initially contributed to the economy, through the 1930s when the government actively began to promote domestic consumption to reinforce the coffee market, to today, coffee has been a key economic contributor to the Costa Rican pocketbook, and consequently, to Costa Rican identity.

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<sup>156</sup> Interestingly, no mention of this *manifestación* was made in *La Nación*, the leading Costa Rican newspaper. These days the importance of coffee in Costa Rica tends to be taken for granted by popular society, despite its continued presence in the economy, rural culture and society, and images and culture throughout the country.

<sup>157</sup> “Ahora el café no solo es el grano de oro, sino además el responsable del bienestar y, por ello, de la paz del costarricense.” Vega, 215.

## Coffee, Rural Egalitarianism and Identity

Coffee production and the income supplied by its export have gone beyond improving the economic well-being of Costa Ricans. This economic improvement has contributed to the formation of a national identity tied to notions of rural egalitarianism. An idea much discussed by scholars, Paige summarizes the notion saying:

The basic assumption is the idea that the unique characteristics of Costa Rica, its democracy and its social peace, rest on the equal division of landed property and the values of the independent yeoman farmer.<sup>158</sup>

Compared to other Central American countries, class structure and land ownership in Costa Rica were not “polarized,”<sup>159</sup> and these remain less polarized in modern times as well.<sup>160</sup> Hall points out, though, that class stratification did exist from the beginning due to land grants given to lower-level royalty to settle in the new world,<sup>161</sup> though the precise class structure of early Costa Rica remains unclear.<sup>162</sup>

Only a few thousand settlers lived in Costa Rica until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and there was no real wealth there before coffee production became prominent.<sup>163</sup> Land was initially abundant. The small settler population and the quickly diminishing numbers of indigenous peoples were important factors in the excess of land. However, Gudmundson observes, “coffee would soon change all this

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<sup>158</sup> Paige, 220.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 221. Roseberry, 5.

<sup>160</sup> Hall, 59.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>162</sup> Gudmundson discusses the development of the smallholder society along with the coffee industry. Gudmundson, “Class Formation.” However, class distinctions existed before coffee, and the exact nature of these divisions is still the subject of discussion.

<sup>163</sup> Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*, 1.

by permanently investing land with past labor in a perennial crop, by increasing land values, and by concentrating family land claims.”<sup>164</sup> The development of the coffee economy soon created land scarcities as land gained value. As land was claimed, some concentration developed, but after a few generations, it became subdivided into small plots, and thus, was more evenly distributed as families passed it on as inheritance.<sup>165</sup> The small indigenous population and a proliferation of land-holders as land became divided contributed to and helped perpetuate the related myth of a white, coffee democracy.

The production of coffee did not actually serve to eliminate class distinctions.<sup>166</sup> However, social stratification began and remained fairly slight because the pre-coffee population was so small and not grossly stratified to begin with. Most early inhabitants of Costa Rica after European arrival were male descendents of the original explorers, or lower-level royals from Spain looking for the possibility of large-scale land-ownership and a chance for greater wealth.

Gudmundson explains:

The egalitarian image of early independent Costa Rica, which is not a completely false one, was made possible by the general isolation and poverty of the vast majority of the population during much of the colonial period.<sup>167</sup>

When land began to gain value with the production of coffee, the famous small-holder society developed. That a significant amount of the population owned a

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<sup>164</sup> Lowell Gudmundson, “Class Formation,” 114.

<sup>165</sup> Gudmundson examines why Costa Rica developed such a large quantity of small-holder property owners.

<sup>166</sup> Paige, 221.

<sup>167</sup> Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*, 1.

bit of land did not preclude class distinctions. An elite class did exist, as did a class of landless wage laborers.<sup>168</sup> Anthropologist Deborah Sick notes:

this is not to say that Costa Rica was a classless paradise of yeoman farmers, soon to be spoiled by capitalist coffee production. Tangible differences existed in Costa Rica before the first coffee boom...<sup>169</sup>

However, land remained relatively well distributed and overall, “the small producer predominated...the bulk of the land was held by small-scale producers.”<sup>170</sup>

Pertaining to the “different” nature of Costa Rica as compared to its “turbulent Central American neighbors,” Creedman has famously dubbed the idyllic descriptions of Costa Rica as the “Switzerland of Central America” as the “white myth.”<sup>171</sup>

Creedman’s original reference to the white myth does not mention race, though subsequent works citing Creedman have inferred a racial connotation, some with significant evidence that a perceived whiteness is associated with Costa Rican well-being.<sup>172</sup> Regarding the white myth, Creedman has the following to say:

Actually some of the elements of this myth are true. Nonetheless Costa Rica has had its share of civil wars, revolutions, and similar upheavals. These problems have been as serious as those of the neighboring republics but they have usually been handled with a bit less bloodshed and civil disorder. Possibly the benign climate, small population, availability of land, or even the desire to live in accordance with the “white myth” have helped to maintain something of this legend.<sup>173</sup>

Noted by scholars since its nominal recognition by Creedman as a myth that belies the truth of social disruptions and inequalities, the white myth has nonetheless been

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<sup>168</sup> Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*, 76.

<sup>169</sup> Sick, 23.

<sup>170</sup> Roseberry, 5.

<sup>171</sup> Creedman, x.

<sup>172</sup> Most significantly, see Paige, 231-3. For criticism of the myth, though not of Creedman’s nominal acknowledgement of it, see Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

pervasive enough to warrant significant discussion in several works written about coffee in Costa Rica.<sup>174</sup> One may question the degree of the “serious” nature of Costa Rican “civil wars, revolutions, and similar upheavals” as compared to other Central American countries. Costa Rica is stable and well-off in many ways, certainly compared to other Central American countries. Moreover, Costa Ricans, like outsiders, and scholars have often attributed the perceived European-ness of the population to the revenue generated by the coffee economy.<sup>175</sup> The “white myth” may be a myth, but it is one that has often been cited as the reason for Costa Rican prosperity.

The roots of the white myth (or “white legend” as Paige calls it) lie in a certain “symbiotic relationship between processor and small producer” called the “coffee pact.”<sup>176</sup> It is in this pact that the members of the coffee oligarchy, or elite (that is, the descendents of Spanish, aristocratic families that own large coffee farms and processing plants)<sup>177</sup> “have acted more responsibly and with greater restraint” than the coffee elites of other Central American countries,<sup>178</sup> and the small producers have not revolted. Thus, the overall stability and peacefulness of Costa Rican politics and society is thought to be related to the amicable relationships between the coffee elite and the small farmer and to the revenue from coffee that lubricates those

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<sup>174</sup> The following is not an exhaustive list: Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America*. Hall, *Costa Rica: A Geographical Interpretation in Historical Perspective*. Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*.

<sup>175</sup> Most Costa Ricans are actually *mestizo*, or mixed. Hall reminds us that “Europeans never comprised more than 1 percent of the population.” Hall, *Costa Rica*, 67.

<sup>176</sup> Paige, 221.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

relationships. Through discourse from members of the coffee elite, it is clear that “the white legend of Costa Rican rural democracy is central to the way elite processors view their world and...it would be safe to say that for most of these processors Costa Rican democracy would be inconceivable without coffee.”<sup>179</sup>

The idea that Costa Rica was formed as a nation of small-scale land holders that cultivate coffee with little class distinction is both prevalent in the literature and seductive, but must be approached with caution. It is true that Costa Rican land and wealth have been more equally distributed than in other Central American countries; however, the notion that class and income distinctions have not existed in Costa Rica is misleading. The most outspoken critic of the notion of the white legend and rural egalitarianism (also referred to as rural democracy) is Lowell Gudmundson, who almost categorically labels it a myth.<sup>180</sup> Costa Rican coffee society, as well as pre-coffee Costa Rica, was subject to class distinctions and poverty, not the beneficiary of complete egalitarianism and great wealth. However, as Paige aptly observes, “like any good myth it has a basis in reality.”<sup>181</sup>

## Coffee Consumption, Social Leveling and Expression of National Culture

Coffee production is not the only manner in which the coffeeeness of Costa Rica is manifested. Costa Ricans are great consumers of their own coffee, and have been since before coffee gained importance as an export commodity in the early to

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 225.

<sup>180</sup> Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*, 1.

<sup>181</sup> Paige, 220.

mid 1800s.<sup>182</sup> As the population with the second-highest coffee consumption rate in Latin America, following only Brazil, domestic coffee consumption is as important as, and related to, elements of Costa Rican identity pertaining to its production. Vega reminds us that “consumption is a sphere active in the economic and social system and that it has been conflated with the flaunting of wealth, the routines, the rituals, and social ascent.”<sup>183</sup> This has very much been the case with coffee in Costa Rica.

The first Costa Ricans to consume coffee were the members of the upper class that would eventually become the coffee elite. Coffee is not native to the Americas, and so after its introduction, it was the members of the government and the religious leaders—occupants of the upper class—that consumed the beverage according to the tradition in their native Europe.<sup>184</sup> During the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, coffee consumption “can be considered as a manifestation of the desire of these elites to associate themselves with some sectors of the European world and so to indicate and differentiate their status.”<sup>185</sup> Vega reminds us though, that sheer taste for and enjoyment of coffee was also a reason for its consumption, as with other stimulating tropical exports like tea, chocolate and sugar.<sup>186</sup>

Though elites in Costa Rica originally produced and consumed coffee as an expression of their affiliation with European society and culture, expanding

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 8. Though Vega has produced a thorough history of coffee consumption in Costa Rica, she does not have much company. More studies should examine the notion of consumption of coffee and national identity in Costa Rica.

<sup>183</sup> “el consumo es una esfera activa en el sistema económico y social y que en mucho ha estado unido a la ostentación, a las rutinas, a los rituales y al ascenso social.” Ibid, 220.

<sup>184</sup> Vega, 6.

<sup>185</sup> “podría asumirse como una manifestación del deseo de estas elites de aparejarse con algunos sectores del mundo europeo y así indicar y diferenciar sue status.” Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

cultivation of the beverage turned it into an expression of Costa Rican identity. Less privileged sectors of Costa Rican society began to grow and consume coffee and sell it in markets as early as 1826.<sup>187</sup> Augmentation of coffee cultivation and coffee consumption in Costa Rica were mutually reinforcing. Coffee was cultivated for families themselves to consume, and perhaps sell to their neighbors; coffee consumption increased due to its local production, and hence, its availability.<sup>188</sup> Eventually, improvements in the transportation system in the country permitted further growth of cultivation and exportation of it, though domestic consumption remained important.

In sum, coffee is more than simply a popular and profitable brown beverage for Costa Ricans. It is an element of national identity, tied to the fact that “consumption is a space for conforming social identities, as it is through the appropriation of goods that human beings differentiate and distinguish themselves in the social complex.”<sup>189</sup> Coffee consumption in Costa Rica was influenced by European culture, but its “primary material is produced in [Costa Rican] territory.”<sup>190</sup> Indeed, the role of consumption in unifying our otherwise disparate experiences is difficult to underestimate. Consumption is the most frequent and most important way in which human being create, destroy, and re-create identities and give meaning to

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>189</sup> “el consumo es un espacio para la conformación de identificaciones sociales pues a través de la apropiación de los bienes, los seres humanos se diferencian y se distinguen en el conjunto social.” Vega, 207.

<sup>190</sup> “material prima se produce en el territorio.” Vega, 221.



places.<sup>191</sup> Coffee consumption was a way for Costa Ricans to assert their European heritage while claiming ownership of it through production, thereby forming and fomenting their unique national identity.

## Coffee, Politics and Identity

Coffee has been an ever present and central part of Costa Rican political life since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Those involved in the coffee industry were the same as those with political power though the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>192</sup> Historian Héctor Lindo-Fuentes observes that “Juan Rafael Mora and José María Montealegre in Costa Rica were both president of their country and its most important coffee planters.”<sup>193</sup> Due to a historical integration of the coffee industry and national politics, the coffee industry was able to successfully avoid most taxation until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>194</sup> At first, the small producers allied themselves with the coffee elite to ensure government support of the coffee industry. Eventually, in the 1930s, small-holder farmers became fed up with “high interest rates for loans and low prices for coffee cherries...[and] the ‘trust of the *beneficiadoras* (coffee processors).”<sup>195</sup> It is in this context that small producers asserted their demands and ICAFE was formed to intervene in the situation.

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<sup>191</sup> Robert Sack, “The Consumer’s World,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 78 (Dec. 1988), 643.

<sup>192</sup> Sick, 27.

<sup>193</sup> Lindo-Fuentes, 51.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, italics in original.

Coffee played an important role in the political events of the 1940s, a tumultuous time in Costa Rican history, particularly the civil war of 1948. One point of contention between Calderón and his challenger Figueres was the place of coffee in the Costa Rican economy. Paige notes that

Calderón was a firm supporter of liberal capitalism and the coffee-based Costa Rican agro export economy. Figueres and the young men of the Centro wanted an economic revolution led by the state to create an industrial Costa Rica,<sup>196</sup>

at the necessary diminution of the role of coffee. However, the coffee elite, angry about the “social guarantees” enacted by Calderón, were allied with Figueres. Coffee interests were now found on both sides of the conflict—Calderón enacting legislation to promote agrarian democracy and the coffee elite aligning with Figueres.<sup>197</sup> In the end, Figueres won, but the desires of the coffee elite did not. Instead, “to the horror of the coffee elite, Figueres soon proved himself to be even more radical than Calderón.”<sup>198</sup> Figueres enacted numerous reforms that, in a sense, built on the social guarantees of Calderón. These reforms included, voting rights for women, a welfare state, and bank nationalization which “transferred control over the direction of the national economy from capital associated with the coffee export economy to the state.”<sup>199</sup> Eventually, acceptance of social reforms such as welfare and cooperativization by the coffee elite has become part of this legend, as they have

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<sup>196</sup> Paige, 145.

<sup>197</sup> Paige, 141-4.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 146.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 151.

come to see these institutions as an extension of the economic democracy of which they are so proud.<sup>200</sup>

The politics surrounding the coffee market are not the only place the coffeeness of Costa Rica is evident in the political sphere. Biesanz et al. observe:

Coffee is a vested interest which has great influence on the government. 'Political fights have been nothing but the disputes between coffee growers and merchants,' writes a student.<sup>201</sup>

Coffee has been a factor in politics surrounding everything from economic policy, to international relations, to environmental policies. In a speech on sustainable development, former President José María Figueres Olsen points out that “for two of our largest crops, coffee and bananas, we are creating incentives that reward cleaner production and offering recycling alternatives to traditional waste disposal.”<sup>202</sup>

Coffee production is truly tied to the environmental movement and the notion of Costa Rica as a “green republic.”<sup>203</sup> Besides the obvious connections of agricultural production practices and environmental sustainability, many coffee farms abut tropical rainforests and thus are affected by many of the same policies.

## Coffee and Popular Culture

It is nearly impossible to visit Costa Rica without being surrounded by images of coffee *fincas* (farms), coffee ox carts, and smiling coffee farmers. The development of tourism as a driving force behind the economy has certainly played

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>201</sup> Biesanz, *Costa Rican Life*, 134.

<sup>202</sup> José María Figueres Olsen, “Sustainable Development: A New Challenge for Costa Rica,” *SAIS Review* 16, no. 1 (1996) 199.

<sup>203</sup> Evans.

up the presence of coffee in popular culture. However, popular expression of a coffee identity is not new. Since even before coffee exports became important, there has been evidence of a popular culture tied to coffee. Biesanz remarked that, “coffee is romanticized by poems, stories, books, a monthly magazine devoted exclusively to coffee, paintings and drawings, and articles made of coffeewood.”<sup>204</sup>

Today, around 19 percent of the population of Costa Rica makes a living from the coffee industry during some part of the year.<sup>205</sup> In the past, the percentage was much higher. Those working in coffee were generally proud to be doing so, and the proliferation of expressions of coffeeness in popular culture can be partially attributed to this. Afterall, “as a money-making occupation, coffee growing gives more prestige than any other really remunerative economic activity,”<sup>206</sup> according to one work on the topic.

According to Vega, coins depicting the coffee fruit from as early as 1873 indicate the beginning of Costa Rica’s association with coffee,<sup>207</sup> and this association only became stronger in the ensuing years. In 1983, Costa Rica was invited to participate in an exposition in Chicago, showcasing its “agricultural character” and products, and coffee “possessed a very important place” in this exposition.<sup>208</sup> Also worth noting is the central role of coffee in *El libro azul de Costa Rica*, or the *Blue Book of Costa Rica*, which was published in 1916.<sup>209</sup> Vega observes that “a good part

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<sup>204</sup> Biesanz, *Costa Rican Life*, 135.

<sup>205</sup> Cafedirect.

<sup>206</sup> Biesanz, *Costa Rican Life*, 134.

<sup>207</sup> Vega, 213.

<sup>208</sup> “carácter agropecuario,” and “el café se posesionó un lugar muy importante.” Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Vega, 214.

of the pages were covered with images of landscapes of the coffee fields of the biggest growers, drying patios, mills, machinery, and pictures of the most important coffee growers.”<sup>210</sup> Popular literature referencing coffee was also available, in addition to that elicited for the supplements published by *La Tribuna*. Biesanz, et al., note that “from reading some eulogies of coffee, one would think it the original nectar of the gods and the only thing that keeps mortals going.”<sup>211</sup> Coffee was clearly an important part of Costa Rican popular culture and national pride.

## Conclusions

Coffee’s role in the formation of a Costa Rican national identity is undeniable. The coffeeeness of Costa Rica is expressed in a multitude of ways, including in its economy, in the structure of society, in the formation of national culture and cultural norms, in the country’s politics, and in popular culture. Costa Ricans have created an identity tied to coffee, and coffee acts as a symbol of that identity that is consistently present through time. As Costa Rica has changed and developed, coffee has helped define what remains essentially Costa Rican.

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<sup>210</sup> “Buena parte de las páginas se destinan a imagines de pasajes de los cafetales de los mayores cultivadores, patios de secado, beneficios, maquinarias y fotografías de los principales cafetaleros.” Vega, 214.

<sup>211</sup> Biesanz, *Costa Rican Life*, 135.

## Chapter 4. Identity in Place Expressed in the Global Economy

Any study seeking to understand the link between identity and place must acknowledge, upfront, the impossibility of its completion. Places are constantly made and re-made and they are constituted of an infinite number of interactions with entities internal and external. Costa Rica is a place where identity is tied to coffee, which is partly the result of the decisions Costa Ricans make. Non-Costa Ricans are also engaged in this project even if they are not aware of it, by traveling to Costa Rica for its coffeeness, by chatting with Costa Rican friends, by supporting or not supporting a certain politician that is involved in policies that affect foreign trade with Central America, or by simply buying Costa Rican coffee.<sup>212</sup>

Recognition of the fluid nature of place calls for the use of a dialectical method in attempting to understand a place. To assume that place, or any entity, is static and that processes are merely happening around or within it ignores the importance of the process that actually constitutes that entity. Instead, we should ask the question: “by what process was it constituted and how is it sustained?”<sup>213</sup> Understanding the place of Costa Rica in one static moment is less instructive than understanding the process by which it has been and continues to be created and defined, because it is constantly evolving. As human beings constantly involved in

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<sup>212</sup> We cannot always trace the reverberations of our decisions to their ends, but being aware that such reverberations exist is a crucial part of acting morally. For more on the moral implications of our place-making actions, please see Robert David Sack, “The Geographic Problematic: Moral Issues,” *Norsk geografisk Tidsskrift-Norwegian Journal of Geography* (2001): 117-25.

<sup>213</sup> David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, & the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996) 50.

the project of place-making by our very nature,<sup>214</sup> we are drawn to and obligated to develop ways to better understand our project.

This paper examines Costa Rica as a coffee place, with a coffee culture. To address the problem of defining Costa Rica as a coffee place requires placement of Costa Rica within a greater world system, as well as examination of cultural perceptions of the country from its own people. Costa Ricans, obviously, construct their own identity. But in this chapter I propose that the coffee culture of Costa Rica was created as well by the desires and expectations of consumers of Costa Rican coffee and by other outsiders. To understand this assertion, we must examine how it became both a coffee place and a place where cooperatives have played an important role in rural, agricultural society. The role of cooperatives in the Costa Rican coffee industry and how the industry is perceived both by insiders and by outsiders must also be considered. By taking a closer look at the coffee culture of Costa Rica, we will be able to understand more profoundly the role that coffee has played in the formation of Costa Rica as well as the place that Costa Rica has come to occupy in the culture of the world.

An obvious lens through which to observe and decant the process of Costa Rican place-making is Costa Rican culture. David Harvey, relying heavily on the work of Raymond Williams, asserts that it is necessary to ground cultural and social theory with considerations of place, space, and environment.<sup>215</sup> In his work, Harvey

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<sup>214</sup> Tuan, 99.

<sup>215</sup> Harvey, *Justice*, 44; David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 186.

wrestles with the notion that culture is “embedded” in the place in which it occurs, with place being presumably a physical notion.<sup>216</sup> To our end, it is most useful to examine culture as one part of place, and furthermore, as the part of place that serves as a reflection of self-identity and of an identity imposed on the place and its inhabitants by others. By looking at the ways in which this culture is perceived and projected, we will be able to make observations about the culture itself.

Finally, this chapter will examine the perceptions of Costa Rica as a coffee producing country from the perspective of world-system theory. The political divisions laid-out by world-system theory outline the placement of countries along many commodity chains, including coffee. Within world-system theory, Costa Rica, a coffee producer, sits firmly in the periphery, while most of the coffee produced by Costa Rica is consumed in the wealthier core countries. Fair-trade coffee, commonly viewed as a way to shorten the distance between producers and consumers, thereby minimizing the exploitative nature of the coffee market, makes up a large portion of the coffee produced by Costa Rica. In reality, it may only disguise a more exploitative process of commodifying culture that is benefiting some farmers, while marginalizing others.

### Costa Rican Coffee Culture: An Identity Not Entirely Self-Created

Coffee is important in Costa Rica. It is a source of income and a way of life, especially for Costa Ricans living in the fertile Central Valley, where the vast

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<sup>216</sup> Harvey, *Justice*, 44.



majority of Costa Rican coffee is cultivated. As mentioned previously in this paper, a quarter of the population of Costa Rica lived on coffee *fincas* in 1930,<sup>217</sup> and more than one fifth of Costa Rica's population make some proportion of its living off of the coffee industry there today.<sup>218</sup> The importance of coffee in Costa Rican culture is, however, more profound than even these numbers suggest.

Historically, coffee has played a central role in the political and economic development of the country. Coffee became important when early Costa Ricans realized that the mountainous sub-tropical weather and volcanic soil of the physical environment there was conducive to producing coffee and even better, that they could sell this product in Europe. Coffee's share in total Costa Rican exports has fallen drastically since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from around 90 percent at that time to around 10 percent in 1990.<sup>219</sup> This decrease in relative coffee production can be attributed to fluctuations in prices, causing many farmers to get out of the industry, as well as the increasing importance of tourism, the electronics industry, and production of other agricultural products like pineapples. The importance of coffee to Costa Ricans has remained strong in spite of the decrease in coffee's overall economic significance, due to the historical presence of coffee in the country and the ubiquitous idea that egalitarianism prevails in the countryside. This egalitarianism is thought to be related to the structure of coffee-farming society, including cooperatives, as well

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<sup>217</sup> Vega Jimenez, 215.

<sup>218</sup> Cafédirect.

<sup>219</sup> Aguilar and Klocker, 595.

as to the profitability of the business of coffee for many of those that have stayed involved.

State support of cooperatives and a supposed proliferation of smallholders in the coffee economy of Costa Rica have led to a “white legend” of a coffee democracy, suggesting that land holding coffee farmers of European descent almost exclusively populate the country.<sup>220</sup> Furthermore, this “white legend” has promoted the idea that the coffee industry was and is a “remarkable system for fairly distributing the benefits of an export economy throughout the society, thereby reinforcing Costa Rica’s democratic ethos.”<sup>221</sup> Indeed, the Costa Rican government and other ruling parties such as the print media embraced wholeheartedly the notion that production and even domestic consumption of coffee would usher in economic prosperity. In the 1930s, when coffee prices were exceptionally low due to the Great Depression, coffee made up more than half of the country’s exports.<sup>222</sup> It was during this time that ICAFE began to seek ways to promote coffee in Costa Rica, and that the newspaper *La Tribuna*, began to publish features and circulars promoting the idea that coffee was “our national product.”<sup>223</sup>

Moreover, elite acceptance of social reforms such as welfare and cooperativization, beginning in the 1940s, became part of this legend, as the elite saw these institutions as an extension of economic democracy.<sup>224</sup> Defense of this legend

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<sup>220</sup> Paige, 230-1, 250.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>222</sup> “nuestro producto nacional.” Vega Jiménez, 215.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Paige, 248-9. Page notes acceptance, and even support, of many of the reforms aimed at supporting social democracy, like support of cooperatives, social welfare, and the labor code did not begin

suggests that to some Costa Ricans, aspects of the coffee culture, such as a belief in egalitarianism, may be even more fundamental to Costa Rican culture than just the coffee-related parts of it. It may be less that coffee in Costa Rican society has created a certain culture, and more that a certain culture already existed in Costa Rican society, and that coffee and a coffee growing society were simply an appropriate fit for it.

Coffee and a certain Costa Rican belief in democracy and egalitarianism, or at least the illusion of these ideals, have shaped the country from the inside.

Meanwhile, identification of the country as a coffee place arguably began, and certainly continues, to be constructed by others. That consumers, usually from other countries, prefer the flavor of a bean grown in one place over another suggests that the primacy of place in the coffee market is at least partially the result of external tastes and factors. Though Costa Ricans decided to plant the bean to begin with, that consumers continue to buy it has maintained its cultivation and has an impact on the construction of Costa Rica and Costa Rican identity.

The interchange of Costa Ricans and outsiders through coffee highlights the way that Costa Rica and the identity of Costa Ricans are mutually constitutive.

Coffee is primarily an export crop, with a relatively small percentage of the quantity produced consumed within the country, and even then, only the poorest quality

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enthusiastically, and that these reforms were certainly not the result of elite “far-sighted[ness].” In fact, “The elite initially *opposed* both the political incorporation of the working class and the enactment of the social guarantees, as its members now candidly concede. (emphasis added)” It is thanks primarily to “pressure from below” that the social reforms often attributed to an egalitarian society of coffee elites were enacted and have been largely preserved.

portion of the crop is reserved for domestic consumption.<sup>225</sup> Costa Ricans did not originally see their coffee crop as a unique product of nation. Instead, it was a desirable beverage, then an exportable crop with fairly high profit margin.

We can see a mixture of internal and external factors that affected Costa Ricans' decisions to produce, and continue to affect the decision to continue producing, coffee. Costa Ricans wanted and continue to want capital, the accumulation of which is constrained or facilitated by internal and external decisions and desires. They have been able to earn this capital by selling coffee, a non-native agricultural product with no nutritional value, to foreigners. To do this, social connections were made starting in approximately the 1820s, and are maintained between Costa Rican farmers, the members of the Costa Rican government, foreign and domestic merchants, and foreign consumers, to outline a simplified commodity chain. European, and later, North American customers liked the taste of Costa Rican coffee and demanded more. It is partly through this process that Costa Rica became a coffee place.

### Cooperatives, Fair-Trade, and International Demand: a Case of Chicken and Egg

While Europeans and North Americans were developing a taste for Costa Rican coffee, and while Costa Ricans were developing notions of rural egalitarianism founded in the coffee economy, another ingredient in the coffeeness of Costa Rica was being formed: cooperativization. Cooperatives were originally intended as a

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<sup>225</sup> Guillermo Vargas Leiton, interview with the author, January 18, 2004.

purely internal way of maintaining the stability of societal structures and, likely, as political leverage with the average coffee farmer. As a consequence, cooperatives and the related “fair trade” movement have had far-reaching consequences on the construction of the cultural notion of Costa Rica as a coffee place. From the outside, high levels of cooperativization have contributed to conflation of Costa Rica as a coffee place with that of it as a fair and progressive place. From the inside, the effect of movement has been two-fold; it has helped create renewed recognition of and support of cooperatives which has led to increased innovation. At the same time, however, it has belied the injustices and difficulties of the coffee industry and the cooperative movement there, by highlighting the marketability of the system and creating a desperation for success in the movement at nearly any cost.

Much has been made of the fair trade movement in the coffee market. The idea of fair trade as it is commonly practiced today began in Europe, with Christian faith-based groups reaching out to people displaced by World War II.<sup>226</sup> The first fair trade coffee was sold by the Dutch organization, Max Havelaar, in 1988, around the time of the collapse of the International Coffee Organization and the ensuing drop in coffee prices on the market.<sup>227</sup> The beneficiary of a marvel of a marketing campaign, it has come to represent to many consumers of fair trade coffee a less exploitative

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<sup>226</sup> William Low and Eileen Davenport, “Postcards from the Edge: Maintaining the ‘Alternative’ Character of Fair Trade,” *Sustainable Development* 13 (2005) 144. Fair-trade is a movement that includes a wide variety of products, perhaps most notably coffee, but also including bananas, crafts, tea and nearly every other imaginable agricultural product. It began as a decentralized movement and as a result does not have one single definition, nor does it have one single organization to represent it. It generally seeks to provide fair prices to producers and protect them from exploitation by the market as well as raising awareness among consumers. Environmental concerns are also addressed by fair-trade organizations. Café Monteverde, *From the Cherry to Your Cup—Learn how Coffee is Processed*, (San José: Coopesanta Elena, n.d).

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

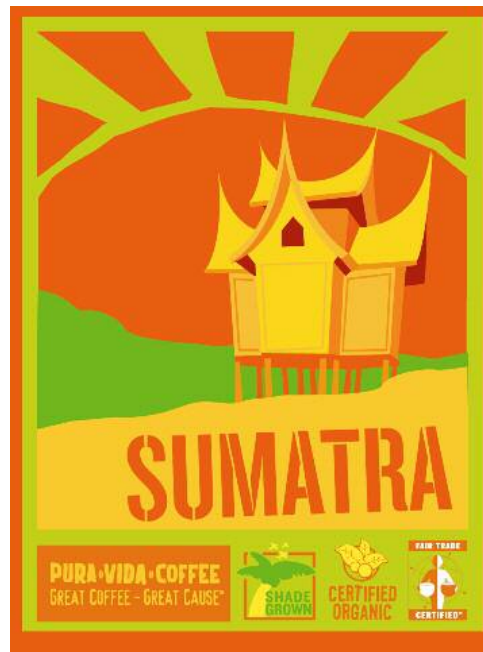
way of participating in a market that is inherently exploitative. The obvious contradictions within this conception of what it means to participate in fair trade aside for the moment,<sup>228</sup> the very number of participants in this alternative market is part and parcel of the hype and propaganda surrounding the movement. As a consumer of coffee, one must partake in the culture that permeates the places in which one must go to get his or her fix of the substance. To enter a coffee shop or even a grocery store aisle to buy coffee involves making a handful of choices. Almost inevitably, one of these choices will be fair trade coffee, indicated by a symbol saying it is “certified” to be sold as a fair-trade product. Coffee giant Starbucks promises that it will brew fair-trade coffee at customers’ requests, in spite of the fact that fair trade coffee represents less than two percent of all coffee sold in the world.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> For a thorough examination of the contradictions found in the fair trade movement, the following works are instructive: Tad Mutersbaugh, “The number is the beast.” Tad Mutersbaugh, “Ethical Trade and Certified Organic Coffee: Implications of Rules-Based Agricultural Product Certification for Mexican Producer Households and Villages,” *Transnational Law & Contemporary Problem* 12, no. 89 (2002): 89-107. Benjamin F. Coles, *(Re)placing the Alternative Coffee Commodity Chain* (MA, Kansas University, 2005).

<sup>229</sup> Transfair, “2004 Fair Trade Coffee Facts and Figures,” Transfair USA, 7 April 2005, <http://www.transfairusa.org/content/Downloads/2004%20FT%20Facts%20and%20Figures.pdf> (Accessed on 29 May 29, 2005): 3.

Figure 2  
Costa Rican Sumatra Coffee Advertisement



Source: Pura Vida Coffee, [http://www.puravidacoffee.com/store/coffee/store\\_body.asp#sumatra](http://www.puravidacoffee.com/store/coffee/store_body.asp#sumatra)

A look at advertisements for socially-conscious coffee is instructive of the misleading manner in which coffee is sometimes portrayed. Figure 2 is a print advertisement for Pura Vida Coffee’s Sumatra coffee. This particular coffee is certified in all three of the main “certifiable” categories—it is shade grown, organic, and fair trade certified. The cheerful colors and the slogan “Great coffee-great cause” lead us to think that by buying this coffee we are helping to save the world. The three logos for the different certifications are meant to justify the higher price likely charged for this particular coffee, in addition to attracting consumers. Moreover, this

company is based out of Seattle, Washington in the United States, and Sumatra is an island in Indonesia where coffee is produced. Though this company that markets this coffee uses the Costa Rican “slogan” “pura vida,” (which means “pure life”) the coffee they are selling is not related to Costa Rica at all. Moreover, this poster tells the consumer little about the coffee itself or what the shade grown, organic, or fair trade symbols mean to the people and place that produced the coffee. That it need not contain clear information about the coffee itself or the way in which it was produced confirms that simply identifying coffee as socially-conscious and “Costa Rican” is sufficient to sell coffee, even when these labels are misleading.

Not all cooperatives produce coffee certified by any of the fair trade organizations. Though their members may receive benefits equal to or better than those that have fair trade certification, these cooperatives have not put up the expense or gone through the trouble of gaining fair trade certification, which is a costly and time-consuming endeavor. Without this certification, though, their coffee is a tougher sell at prices comparable to fair trade prices. In Costa Rica, cooperatives and the Costa Rican government are promoting the creation of a Costa Rican certification for “sustainable coffee.”<sup>230</sup> This certification will be subsidized by the Costa Rican government, specifically COOCAFE.

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<sup>230</sup> Director of the Fundación Café Forestal and Coordinator of Sustainable Coffee Certification for Coocafe, interview with author, July 8, 2005.



Figure 3  
Café Monteverde Bag



Source: <http://www.cafemonteverde.com/monteverdebag.JPG>

Figure 3 is a coffee bag from Café Monteverde, which is, in effect, a print advertisement itself. Slightly more descriptive than the Sumatra ad, this ad features a quetzal (the mascot of the cloud forest from which this coffee hails) and says outright that it is “Grown in Harmony with the Cloud Forest.” Unfortunately, that statement does not mean much to anyone that has not visited the area or read about this coffee on their website. The cooperative that produces this coffee, Coopesanta Elena, R.L. relies on the heavy tourism in the region to sell its coffee without the aid of fair trade certification labels. Despite the advantage of tourists, as of the summer of 2005 there was discussion among members of the cooperative regarding trying for fair trade

certification.<sup>231</sup> Members did not feel that certification would make the cooperative more fair; they felt it would help them sell more coffee.

The effects of this marketing on countries that produce coffee are substantial. Nearly all coffee produced in the world comes from tropical and subtropical developing regions, while the majority of coffee is consumed in the United States and Europe. Incidentally, it is these countries, along with Canada and Japan, which have fair trade labeling organizations.<sup>232</sup> These countries have played a significant role in the mode of production of coffee (and other fair trade products like tea, milk, and bananas), as well as a significant role in forming the cultures and societies that depend on these markets for their survival.

In the case of Costa Rica, the story of cooperatives is much more of a success story than in other Central American countries, such as Nicaragua. In the case of Nicaragua, when the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua, their efforts to successfully support cooperative formation were effective: between 1978 and 1979, 1,976 cooperatives were formed in Nicaragua, while only 22 existed before 1978 and 50 percent of all peasants joined cooperatives in the first three years following the revolution.<sup>233</sup> When they were voted out of power in 1990, the Chamorro government began to implement neo-liberal reforms aimed at privatizing the

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<sup>231</sup> Guillermo Vargas-Leiton, interview with author, June 25, 2005.

<sup>232</sup> Erik Millstone and Tim Lang, *The Penguin Atlas of Food*, (Brighton: Penguin, 2003), p. 74-5.

<sup>233</sup> Center for the Study of Agrarian Reform (CIERA), *Tough Row to Hoe: Women in Nicaragua's Agricultural Cooperatives* (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, [1985 or 1986]) 9.

economy and dividing it into “microenterprises.”<sup>234</sup> As a result, cooperatives that had been successful in providing their members with stable incomes during the Sandinista period struggled, and many were forced to disband because they could not pay rent or support benefits they had previously provided to members.

Costa Rica, on the other hand, has seen a steady rise in the number of coffee producer cooperatives. In 1943, the first coffee cooperative in Costa Rica to have any success, Cooperativa Industrial Agrícola Victoria, was formed.<sup>235</sup> In the ensuing 35 years, an additional 30 coffee cooperatives were formed.<sup>236</sup> By 1989, there were over 350,000 members of coffee cooperatives in Costa Rica, which represented “30 percent of the economically active population and produc[ed] 13 to 14 percent of the gross domestic product.”<sup>237</sup> Moreover, “of the 110 beneficios registered with ICAFE for the 1989-1990 harvest year, 35 were cooperatives.”<sup>238</sup> Beginning in the 1940s when they first received governmental support as part of the Social Guarantees,<sup>239</sup> cooperatives have had a significant presence in the Costa Rican coffee industry.

The proliferation of cooperativization in the coffee industry of Costa Rica owes as much to the convenient ideological fit of cooperativization in society and the ease of its progression due to the existing division of land, as the benefits it has brought to individual farmers and their families. Seligson’s in-depth study on why Costa Ricans are more apt to join cooperatives than their neighbors is inconclusive,

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<sup>234</sup> Florence E. Babb, *After Revolution: Mapping Gender and Cultural Politics in Neoliberal Nicaragua* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2001) 32-3.

<sup>235</sup> Sick, 30.

<sup>236</sup> Cazanga, 112.

<sup>237</sup> Sick, 32.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 30.

but suggests that those peoples predisposed to trust, with higher levels of education and wealth relative to their neighbors may be more apt to join.<sup>240</sup> Costa Ricans have benefited from peace, a high society-wide value placed on education, and relative economic prosperity compared to their neighbors, which, in addition to state support, may help explain why cooperatives have enjoyed so much success there.

It is a commonly held assumption amongst consumers and scholars alike that farmers in cooperatives may inherently benefit from connections they frequently have with global, socially concerned organizations, namely fair-trade organizations. A growing cadre of scholars, though, is critical of this assumption, pointing out divisions that can be created in communities where only some farmers benefit from these connections.<sup>241</sup> Sociologist John M. Talbot also points out that fair trade coffee is, in reality, mostly a symptom of the “yuppie syndrome” that drives people to pay more for something simply to flaunt their wealth. Talbot argues that very characteristic, trendy fair-trade coffee will never threaten main-stream coffee produced by the large transnational corporations, especially since these premium prices are based on simply paying a little more than the actual market price.<sup>242</sup> Small producers of fair-trade coffee are, in the end, still governed by the whims and desires of the market, which is itself dependent on the whims and desires of consumers in the core. In the end, then, fair-trade coffee quietly serves to reinforce the placement of

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<sup>240</sup> Mitchell A. Seligson, “Cooperative Participation among Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries in Costa Rica,” *Journal of Rural Cooperation* 10, No. 2 (1982): 113-49.

<sup>241</sup> Mutersbaugh, “The number is the beast.” Mutersbaugh, “Ethical Trade.” John M. Talbot, *Grounds for Agreement: The Political Economy of the Coffee Commodity Chain* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 207-9.

<sup>242</sup> Talbot, 207-8.

Costa Rica and other coffee producer countries below consumer countries on the commodity chain. Unfortunately, the economic benefits of selling or the status of buying fair-trade coffee is only reserved for certain members of their respective societies. For the others, especially in producer countries, the presence of fair-trade in their communities simply places them another step lower on the commodity chain of wealth.

Instructively, few of the critics of cooperatives and fair-trade are Costa Rican. Coffee producer cooperatives are quite prevalent in Costa Rica, producing around a third of the coffee crop. Fair trade certification is less popular, likely due to the costs and time commitment involved in obtaining the certification. Costa Rica has less than ten coffee organizations (farms or cooperatives) with national fair-trade certification, the fewest in Central America.<sup>243</sup> Costa Rican farmers normally can get fairly high prices for their coffee without certification.

At least one optimistic scholar has acknowledged the problem with making assumptions that fair-trade is inherently beneficial to all, but continues to maintain that grower members of fair trade and related organizations are overwhelmingly the “protagonists” in the process and that it is not a case of “the south dancing only to a northern song.”<sup>244</sup> However, even if fair trade is the result of a proactive producer movement, the end result is not free from the problems and contradictions pointed out by critics. By exporting fair trade coffee, and other premium coffees that Costa Rica

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<sup>243</sup> Millstone and Lang, 74-5.

<sup>244</sup> Robert A. Rice, “Noble Goals and Challenging Terrain: Organic and Fair Trade Coffee Movements in the Global Marketplace,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 14, (2001): 43-4.

produces, to consumers in the consumer countries, Costa Ricans are also exporting their culture as a commodity, which consumers snatch up at market prices, or slightly above.

## The Relationship between Cooperatives and Fair Trade

Cooperatives and fair-trade organizations are common partners; according to Oxfam all coffee sold under the label “Fair Trade Certified” must come from a cooperative.<sup>245</sup> When cooperatives sell their coffee within “fair-trade” agreements that guarantee the farmer a certain guaranteed base price, currently \$1.26 per pound,<sup>246</sup> the farmer has an economic incentive to sell to the cooperative instead of to a private processor. As of April 2004, the price of coffee sold on the market outside of fair-trade agreements was 59.10 cents per pound. This means a farmer selling his crop to a fair-trade organization currently makes more than double what a farmer who sells on the regular market makes. Moreover, the small-holding farmer has the chance to make more money by selling to a cooperative because profits from the sale of the coffee return to the producer, as much as twelve percent as opposed to three percent in the traditional path.<sup>247</sup> Many people attribute this higher profit margin to a shorter chain leading from producer to consumer in a cooperative or fair trade path, though Mutersbaugh and others challenge this notion, pointing out that it all boils

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<sup>245</sup> Oxfam America, 2004, “What is Fair Trade Coffee?” On Oxfam America [Website online], (Boston: Oxfam America, 2004 [cited 7 April 2004]), <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/campaigncoffee/art3391.html>, (Accessed May 2005).

<sup>246</sup> Oxfam America.

<sup>247</sup> Café Monteverde, 9.

down one's perceptions of what constitutes a "link" to determine how many there are in a commodity chain.<sup>248</sup>

Economic benefits are not the only reasons for a farmer to join a cooperative, however. After all, "cooperativism is a system of social and economic, autonomous organization whose fundamental challenge is the service to its associates and not economic gain. It is a system that groups and associates people and not capital."<sup>249</sup> Cooperatives represent a merging of democratic and socialist ideals into one organization that provides its members an array of services. Indeed, cooperatives in Costa Rica often aim to provide their members with some combination of the following: fair prices for crops, education and health services, equipment and fertilizers, infrastructure, and the assistance and advice of experts on ways to maintain production and diversity. A farmer may join a cooperative for economic reasons, but discover other reasons to continue her membership, as did one member of CoopeSanta Elena. This member, Laura, say she first joined to earn a higher price for her coffee, and only after that did she learn "to be a *cooperativista*."<sup>250</sup> Another *cooperativista*, Lidieth, emphasized non-economic motives for her participation in the cooperative; she said "it seems to me that the cooperative is always thinking about the members."<sup>251</sup> Much of Costa Rican coffee, particularly that sold to cooperatives, is grown on small plots that do not provide the family's only source of income.

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<sup>248</sup> Mutersbaugh, "The number is the beast." Coles.

<sup>249</sup> "[e]l cooperativismo es un sistema de organización social y económico autónomo cuya meta fundamental es el servicio a sus asociados y no el lucro. Es un sistema que agrupa y asocia personas y no capitales," De Oduber, 1.

<sup>250</sup> Laura, interview with the author, Santa Elena, Costa Rica, June 25, 2005.

<sup>251</sup> Lidieth, interview with the author, Santa Elena, Costa Rica, June 25, 2005.

Coopeartives help allow these small-scale farmers to continue to grow coffee, as well as to find ways to diversify their crops and their sources of income. According to Laura, “if there weren’t any cooperatives, you wouldn’t see coffee [in Costa Rica] because many people wouldn’t want to depend only [on coffee].”<sup>252</sup>

The education and training services provided by cooperatives benefit both society and individuals. This training contributes to technical modernization of the industry and overall human capital formation. To compete with private firms, cooperatives may hire outside experts to instruct their farmers in new growing techniques. According to Mora, cooperatives act as “vehicles of modernization of the agricultural sector” by encouraging competition in the coffee industry, for example, between cooperatives and privately owned *beneficios* and allowing small-scale farmers access to modern techniques and equipment.<sup>253</sup>

Furthermore, the money earned by coffee farmers may create greater opportunities for children to attend school, yet another facet of education supported by cooperativization. Paige argues that the money farmers earn in the harvest allows them to provide their families with clothes and school supplies. He further argues that “coffee [has even] reinforced Costa Rican democracy by providing the financial basis for upward mobility through education and creating a well-educated middle-

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<sup>252</sup> Laura, interview with the author.

<sup>253</sup> “vehículo[s] de modernización del sector agropecuario.” Jorge Mora A., Olga Sánchez Oviedo, and Luis Fernando Fernández A., “El impacto de las políticas macroeconómicas en el agro Costarricense,” *El impacto de la política económica in el agro centroamericano*, Eds. Jorge Mora A. and Luis Fernando Fernández, ([Heredia, Costa Rica]: Universidad Nacional, Facultad de Ciencias de la Tierra y el Mar, Maestría Regional en Desarrollo Rural, 1994), 38.



class society.”<sup>254</sup> Farmers generally receive much higher prices when they sell their coffee to a cooperative than when they sell it to a private mill, though this is not always the case, especially when market prices are “naturally” high. Regardless, few people familiar with the Costa Rican system would deny that children of families that are members of cooperatives may have more opportunities than children of similarly situated non-cooperativist families for continuing their education past the basic levels.

Despite the socialist nature of the side of the cooperative that provides these services, cooperation operates as a democratic and capitalist institution. De Oduber points out that “cooperativism needs a democratic state and society to exist,”<sup>255</sup> but this may be an overstatement. Moreover, according to Sick, members of Coopeagri R.L. often point out “*cooperativismo* must be in the pocket as well as in the heart.”<sup>256</sup> Economics are one of the main driving forces, if not the primary driving force, behind cooperativization. In their purest form of uniting farmers for greater leverage in obtaining high prices for their coffee on the market, cooperatives represent an organized and governmentally sanctioned method of forging relationships between laborers to garner access to capital and power. Moreover, the democratic and capitalist ideals and functions of cooperatives are important both within the cooperative and in the society that produces cooperativization despite organizational goals of serving both the individual farmer and the surrounding community. This is a socially oriented idea indeed, though not necessarily a socialist one.

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<sup>254</sup> Paige, 223.

<sup>255</sup> “el cooperativismo necesita un estado y una sociedad democrática para existir.” de Oduber, 1.

<sup>256</sup> Sick, 80.

When successfully executed, cooperativization provides countless benefits to members. The fact that people continue to pursue this type of organization despite the sacrifices involved and the high probability of failure may serve as the most convincing evidence of the many benefits of cooperativization. These benefits include, but are certainly not limited to, financial gains. Members gain the satisfaction of helping themselves, structural and social improvements to their communities, technical training and increased opportunities for their families. However, as Mutersbaugh reminds us, even a successful cooperative will pay prices, such as the exclusion of certain individuals at the cost of social relationships and the submission of cultivation methods to invasive certification processes.<sup>257</sup>

Even when all members of the cooperative are happy with their place in the organization, the very fact that their organization must be certified by an organization from a more “developed” country produces “new differences” in the society in which the cooperative is located, drawing distinctions where before there were none. These changes brought on by outside forces must be considered along with more positive ones when examining a changing culture. It is not my intention here to enter into a discussion concerning how or why alternative markets have become important or how our perceptions as consumers of our place within a global market have changed. These discussions require much more space than is available here, and have been worked on by sociologist Marie-Christine Renard, Mutersbaugh, and others.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Mutersbaugh, “The number is the beast.”

<sup>258</sup> Marie-Christine Renard, “The Interstices of Globalization: The Example of Fair Coffee,” *Sociologia Ruralis* 39 (1999):484-500, Mutersbaugh, “Ethical Trade.” Mutersbaugh, “The Number is the Beast.”

However important these outside forces have been, it would be imperialistic to imply that Costa Ricans themselves are without agency, hapless victims of overpowering market forces called forth by the United States and Europe. To truly understand the development of this culture requires recognition of the agency of Costa Ricans as much as it requires looking to forces playing upon the country from the outside. Costa Ricans began producing coffee in large quantities in the 1820s, before there was a market specifically for their coffee. They also began supporting producer cooperatives in the 1940s, before the fair trade movement and alternative markets began to flourish. Moreover, many Costa Ricans have continued to produce coffee even when their main source of income comes from elsewhere. The economic production of a coffee culture in Costa Rica has been the result of a process of give and take between Costa Ricans themselves as much as from people and forces from outside of the country.

### Turning the World-System Theory of Commodities on its Head: Costa Rica as an Exporter of Coffee and Culture

Recall that most coffee is produced in tropical, “developing” regions, while most coffee is consumed in the so-called developed nations of the Europe, the United States, Canada, and Japan. Furthermore, it is in these “developed” nations that all of the fair-trade and organic certifying organizations are based. Drawing on world-system theory, a simple but significant pattern of commodity, capital, and cultural flows can be seen. Those producer countries at the bottom of the coffee commodity chain are almost exclusively members of the periphery, while those countries doing

the majority of the consumption of coffee and all of the certification of “social premium” coffee are members of the core. Within the commodity chain of coffee, clearly the core’s desires for coffee, including coffee that has a certain “social premium,” are clearly influencing the decisions of the coffee producing members of the periphery. What is unclear is how much influence these desires have on the actions of the producers. Another consideration is how much producers of coffee influence the decisions consumers are making.

In world-system theory, the periphery is generally where low-technology, basic industry is located, including the production and exportation of raw materials. High-technology industry tends to be located in core countries, which some scholars, most famously Raul Prebisch, have argued is a result of markets that imperialist powers have created to induce dependency of the former colonies on their colonizers.<sup>259</sup> The commodity chain of coffee fits easily into the framework of this theory. Coffee is grown in “developing” countries and shipped to “developed” countries for final processing and consumption. Unlike many agricultural products, however, coffee requires some amount of immediate processing to dry it and remove it from the cherry, but this is primarily low-technology processing, and the amount of economic value it adds to the product is minimal.

To earn a profit selling coffee, like any product, one needs to sell a specific amount of it, or to sell a smaller amount of a higher-quality, more expensive version of that product. Circumstances have led Costa Rica to opt for the latter with regards

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<sup>259</sup> Raul Prebisch, *Towards a Dynamic Development Policy for Latin America* (New York: United Nations, 1963).

to coffee production, unable to compete with massive producer of mostly low-grade coffee, Brazil. The existing smallholder society in Costa Rica in which many families owned and worked their own small farms, combined with the ideal climate in the *mesa central* for growing high quality coffee provided Costa Rica a way to profit from the coffee industry without competing directly with Brazil.

Talbot insinuates that the coffee market in Costa Rica developed this way out of necessity in response to Brazil's prominence in the mass-production of coffee.<sup>260</sup> It is more likely, however, that Costa Rica simply developed its coffee industry according to its existing culture and society. Costa Rica was already populated primarily by smallholder farmers and to produce small amounts of high-quality coffee was more a matter of their own agency than the agency of other actors in the market. The cultural and societal structures that existed in Costa Rica affected the way coffee was produced there. Encouragement of such behavior from the market, however, may have increased the tendency of Costa Ricans toward maintaining such production, and consequently, such culture and society.

A similar argument can be made concerning the "taste" for Costa Rican coffee and the demand for socially-responsible coffees. Costa Ricans began producing high-quality and cooperative coffees before there was a market a demand for these specific coffees. However, Costa Ricans have also been encouraged by a demand for this kind of coffee, as by the necessity of the mode of production appropriate to their history and environment. Growing demand for these kinds of specialty coffees has

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<sup>260</sup> Talbot, 46-7.

led many producing countries to change the way in which they produce some or much of their coffee. Costa Rican culture, and thus the structure of its production regime, based in a smallholder farming society and sustained by state-supported cooperatives and a handful of private producers, had the structures in place to respond to this demand by simply continuing to produce coffee the way it always had. In the Costa Rican coffee industry, the pressures from the market have been not so much altering as confirming.

Within the spatial framework provided by world-system theory, the wealth of Costa Rica, a peripheral country, is expected to be drained toward core countries when resources are exported from Costa Rica in the form of raw materials or low-technology goods. To a point, this is a useful way of viewing the Costa Rica's place within the world coffee market. Relatively little of the profit from selling a pound of roasted coffee to a consumer is seen by the farmer or even by other intermediaries within Costa Rica. However, to simply view Costa Ricans as victims of their spatial and economic situation within a world capitalist system may be missing the point.

In world-system theory, the tendency toward ceaseless capital accumulation may be overstated. After all, while Costa Rica is participating in a world-system wherein capital wealth is exported from nation-states in the periphery to nation-states in the core by exporting un-roasted coffee to the United States and Europe for roasting and sale, it is also exporting their culture "up" the commodity chain, by sending along images of coffee farmers and ideas of cooperative-based fair trade. To import profits from another place necessarily involves removing them from that

place; to import culture may increase the strength of those ideas in the original place. Costa Ricans have long regarded their country as a coffee place. Since the fair-trade movement and other movements toward increasing consumers' awareness of the source of coffee and other products began, Costa Rica has become a coffee place to the world, even if these cultural images and ideas do not tell the entire story. Costa Ricans and the consumers of specialty and social-premium coffee have, together, defined Costa Rica as a coffee place through commodification of Costa Rican coffee-producing culture.

### The Coffeeness of Costa Rica in the Global Market

In sum, the placement of Costa Rica within the world system is an ongoing process. It is one that has shaped, and continues to shape, Costa Rican culture. Conceptions of Costa Rica as a coffee place come from both inside the country and outside of it, and reinforce each other in defining Costa Rica's cultural identity as a coffee place. Often seen as a source of income from within, and a way of life from the outside, these two viewpoints are becoming ever-more conflated within the culture of coffee production, even though the reality is that they have always been the same thing for most Costa Ricans working in coffee. As the culture of making one's living producing coffee becomes ever more commodified, and some would say romanticized, Costa Ricans are able to capitalize on not only the coffee they produce, but also on the actual production process to make a living. The dual nature in which Costa Ricans have been able to capitalize on coffee has not been unproblematic or

without contradictions; these problems, however, are seldom noted. The Costa Rican culture that is bought and sold on the market is only one side of the story.

Overlooked are the producers that are unable, or unwilling, to participate in cooperatives or fair-trade production,<sup>261</sup> whose voices are often unheard in the process of defining Costa Rican culture, especially against the shouting of fair-trade proponents in the core countries.

The result of Costa Rican participation in the world coffee market is a global reputation as a coffee place with a coffee culture. This is partially the result of the Costa Rican definition of their own culture and partially a result of outside definition of their culture, which is primarily played out in the coffee market as various desires and demands for certain coffees with certain images. As a part of the world-system Costa Rica cannot avoid the process of having its cultural identity partially formed by the outside, nor should Costa Ricans necessarily want to avoid this. The rich coffee-producing culture that is so important in Costa Rica is partially due to external tastes and pressures, for example. However, this process has not been totally defined by the demands of the market either. Coffee and cooperatives that produce coffee have played definitive roles in this process from their established place in the Costa Rican culture as well as from demand for their products on the market. In the ongoing process of market demands and cultural commodification, Costa Rican cultural identity has defined Costa Rica's place within the world system.

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<sup>261</sup> Mutersbaugh, "The number is the beast."



## **Chapter 5. Summary and Conclusions**

This paper has asserted that coffee is a crucial part of Costa Rican identity. The processes that have formed the coffeeeness of Costa Rica have been complex, and are constantly changing and subject to influence from forces internal and external to Costa Rica. By examining the historical context in which this identity was formed, and looking at specific examples of coffeeeness as expressed in Costa Rican national culture and by Costa Rica as part of a world-system, we can better understand the profound importance of coffee in Costa Rica and of Costa Rican coffeeeness in the global market. As a commodity that is highly tied to its place of origin, Costa Rican coffee acts as a prism that separates and clarifies the elements of cultural and economic identity that are tied up in commodity exchange. Coffee's unique role in Costa Rica has helped define Costa Rica both by acting as an agent to cohere national cultural identity and by setting Costa Rica apart from other countries.

### **Summary of the Project**

The first chapter of the paper addressed the goal of this project, which was to examine how and why Costa Rican identity became partially formed and defined by coffee. The second chapter outlined the history of Costa Rica through the lens of the development of coffee as a commodity. Important events in the history of coffee in Costa Rica were the undeveloped economy into which it was introduced, its importance as an export to Britain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the political

developments of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially the social reforms of the 1940s. These developments set the stage for the permanence of the coffeeiness of Costa Rican national identity, even in a time of the commodity's decline in economic importance.

Chapter three addressed various examples of the manifestation of Costa Rica's coffee identity. The nearly ubiquitous presence of coffee in the development of Costa Rica provides countless examples of the product's consistent role in Costa Rican politics, society, and culture. Costa Rican culture would not be the same without the presence of coffee in the country.

Chapter four has dealt with the problem of defining Costa Rica as a coffee place by situating Costa Rica within a greater world system using world-system theory, and by examining cultural perceptions of the country from its own people. The coffee culture of Costa Rica was created by the desires and expectations of consumers of Costa Rican coffee and by other outsiders, as well as by Costa Ricans themselves. The result of Costa Rican participation in the world coffee market is that Costa Rica is known as a coffee place with a coffee identity, due to both Costa Rican and outside definitions of what Costa Rican culture means.

### Applications of this project

Right now Costa Rica is at a crossroads regarding its coffee. The often homogenizing forces of globalization are affecting Costa Rica, like every place. That there is even discussion of allowing robusta to be produced in Costa Rica is an

indication that the coffee situation is changing. Previously, there was too much pride in the high quality, high priced arabica coffee that Costa Rica produced for there to be a push to allow the production of lower quality, lower priced robusta. Cultural and material inputs, like increased tourism from abroad, have altered the landscape of this coffee place. The coffeeness of Costa Rica is changing from a coffeeness that stressed the processes of production and quality of the coffee, to one that emphasizes marketing and packaging, along with the culture of Costa Rica itself.

If robusta is allowed to be produced in the country as a commodity, many of Costa Rica's remaining small- and medium-holder farmers will be forced to give up their farms. They simply will not be able to compete with cheaper robusta coffee that is produced in bulk. The current Costa Rican coffee market, by tradition and by rule of law, caters to the high-end specialty market for coffee, as well as alternative markets that are interested in buying coffee produced by cooperatives. Allowing robusta to be produced in Costa Rica may lower the standard held by consumers for Costa Rican coffee and cheaper robusta may be marketed in place of higher quality arabica, lowering the overall price for Costa Rican coffee. The multitude of small-holder farmers of more artesanal coffees will not be able to compete and many will be forced to abandon their bushes.

If small-holder farmers are unable to continue to grow coffee, cooperatives will also fail. Costa Rica will eventually lose the small-holder coffee farmer culture and cooperative institutions that help distinguish its identity. If decision makers apply the geographic problematic to the issue, however, they may recognize that

diminishing the uniqueness of Costa Rica will make it a less “good” place than it was when it was unique.

If the market for social premium coffees were to improve, we might see an opposite effect. Right now, most Costa Ricans that grow coffee do so to earn only part of their income, even though this may not be the only reason that they grow coffee. If the market began to offer extremely high prices for the kinds of sustainable coffees produced by many Costa Rican farmers, other Costa Ricans might be inclined to try to get into the coffee business. In this case, Costa Rica might become more of a coffee place than it is, rather than less of a coffee place. However, Costa Rica can only be a coffee place as it is currently understood by producing small amounts of high-quality coffee using methods that seek to be sustainable. Drastic improvement of the social-premium coffee movement might end up diluting the meaning of sustainable coffee production as well as coffee production in general. Conversion of traditional Costa Rican coffee production into mass-produced Costa Rican coffee production might change the meaning of the coffeeness of Costa Rica, thus changing Costa Rica for the worse. It might turn Costa Rica into a place that hides the reality of coffee production behind a false idea of sustainable coffee production.

The world is becoming more integrated and the effects of globalization are becoming more obvious. States, international bodies, and even individuals are grappling to come to terms with the ever more immediate effects that events that occur in one place have on another. In the midst of this process, there is much discussion regarding the bounds of sovereignty that a state has, including regarding

agricultural subsidies and environmental initiatives. It is crucial that we develop an understanding of the ways in which commodities define identities and link places. Only by understanding the links between commodities, places, and identities can we informed policy decisions.

This paper has explored the way that one commodity from one place, Costa Rican coffee, has been definitive in the formation of Costa Rica and Costa Rican identity. The coffee industry in Costa Rica is heavily subsidized by tax breaks, support from ICAFE, and support of cooperatives, and the subject of strict management, including the ban on robusta and strict quality control standards. These policies give the coffee industry in Costa Rica an advantage over some other industries, and they give Costa Rican coffee an advantage over some other coffees. As decisions are made regarding the future of coffee in Costa Rica, it will be paramount that decision makers weigh the cultural and social aspects of Costa Rican coffee along with the environmental and economic aspects.

### Final Thoughts and Suggestions for Future Research

It is impossible to predict what the future holds for coffee and cooperatives in Costa Rica. However, by observing and trying to understand the process that Costa Rica has been experiencing since the introduction of coffee in the region, Costa Ricans and those otherwise concerned with Costa Rica will have better footing for whatever changes and challenges may lie ahead.

Costa Rica's identity is tied to coffee as a result of specific cultural, societal, and physical factors. The various factors and processes that have contributed to the formation of the coffeeness of Costa Rica cannot be reduced to one simple explanation. Instead, a careful look at the way that Costa Rican identity has woven together various elements is necessary for understanding the role of coffee in Costa Rica. Recognizing that Costa Rican identity is related to coffee consumption and production is part of a broader project that could be undertaken of viewing other national identities through the lens of commodities.

Commodities are products of several places and tell the history of complex and telling factors that have contributed to their continued production. Working on the project of situating coffee and other commodities within the places they come from and travel through toward their destinations is one way to examine national identity formation in a way that includes cultural, societal, and physical elements. Examining the way in which places weave together various elements, and project images of the place that is created on commodities produced there is a new and important manner of examining the world system. Previous studies on commodities have focused on the economic effects of exchange of the commodity, or less often, on the cultural rituals tied up with consumption of that commodity. There is ample room in the literature to conduct studies of products at all stops along the commodity chain that take into account the way that product contributes to national identity, as well as defining the economic situation of that place. Coffee, and other commodities like wine, are often explicitly tied to their place of origin and provide obvious venues for

studies like this. Other commodities that are less obviously tied to their place of origin, like rice, could provide challenging and instructive opportunities as well.

Coffee is a unique commodity, a stimulant with no nutritional value, which is produced in poor, tropical places and consumed primarily in wealthier, non-tropical places. As with most primary exports, little of the profits from coffee production are seen by the average coffee picker, and a situation of exporting products and profits up the commodity chain is present. Though coffee, especially premium coffee like that produced in Costa Rica, is generally a luxury commodity, it is also a relatively inelastic commodity. The amount of coffee an individual will consume does not change drastically with fluctuations in expendable income. Interesting work is being done, and should continue regarding the viability of and alternatives to fair trade as a way to maintain coffee production yet improve the economic situation of producer countries and individual producers. This work should also continue to consider environmental effects of coffee production.

Costa Rica is a coffee place due to its social history, its physical environment, and its cultural identity. Coffee has thrived and has been a crucial piece of Costa Rican identity because certain factors from all of these different fronts has allowed it, and even required it to be that way. The physical environment in Costa Rica, the process by which certain class distinctions have been defined or belied, and the marketability of notions of Costa Rican culture have created a situation in which coffee is an integral part of defining Costa Rica. Scholars, consumers, and Costa Ricans all must take care to acknowledge the complexity found in a cup of Costa

Rican coffee and their role in the formation of Costa Rican identity and of the place that is Costa Rica.



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