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Certification Ethics: Towards Better Bananas?

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Overview

- Does ethics certification lead to “better” products and product information?
- Dean’s (1999) analytics of government framework used to problematise and analyse the ethical certification practices of companies with varying certifications and claims in the New Zealand banana market.



Banana Facts

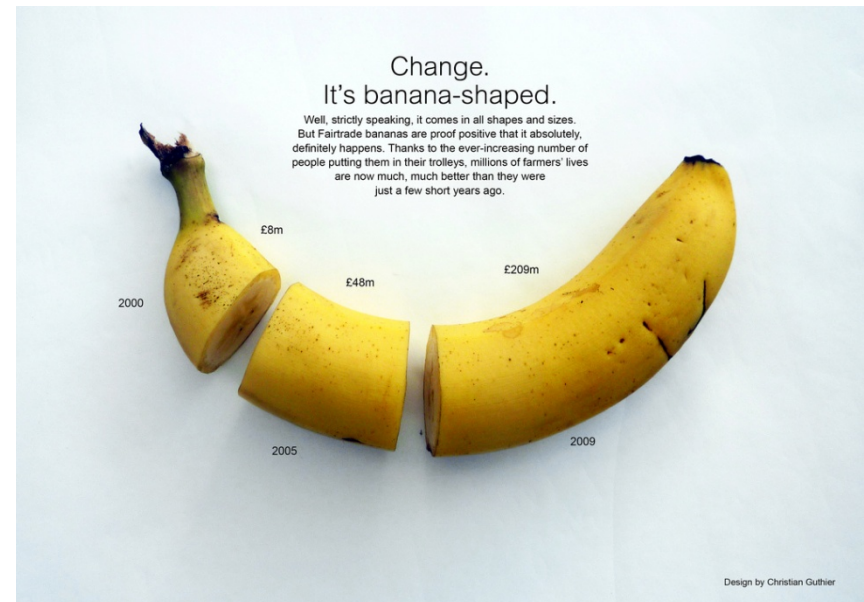
- We eat a lot of bananas (rice, wheat, corn, bananas) - \$143 million market in NZ, \$25 billion globally
- Low-cost, commodity product
- History of large, negative environmental and social impacts
- Internationally huge growth in FairTrade bananas

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Ethical Certification

- Certification and labels can act as a “short-cut” for consumers’ purchase decisions
 - communicate environmental and/or social information about products
- Types
 - Self-certification
 - Second party certification
 - Third party certification
- Increasingly profitable



Criticisms of Certification



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- Proliferation of labels
- Costly to develop/implement
- Legitimacy/credibility/greenwashing
- Single-attribute certifications that pick off only one particular criterion
- Transparency of the standards behind the labels

Governmentality

“any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct through working through our desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs, for definite but shifting ends with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes” (Dean, 1999, p. 11).

Governmentality Applied to the NZ Banana Market

- Problematisation of current practice of governing
- Four analytics of fields of visibility, techne (techniques and practices), episteme (knowledge created) and identity formation are applied
- Utopian element – what is desired ends

- Four banana marketing companies
- Products from different tropical locales, and that look and taste similar

The visual analytic

Take Your Pick



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Regular bananas \$1.89-\$2.49 / kg
Dole's Ethical Choice bananas \$2.99 /kg
All Good Bananas \$3.99 / bunch \geq 850g
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- The teche analytic
 - The eco-label and certification connotes that the product which carries the label has undergone routines and practices – and has been endorsed.
- The episteme analytic
 - Knowledge created about the products that carry the label – as ‘better’ than products that don’t display a label
 - Price points could also work to construct knowledge
- Identity formation
 - Fairtrade, All Good, Dole, and the ‘ethical consumer’ all constructed as governed or governors (or both) within the practice of ethical certification
- Utopian element
 - Appears to be a taken-for-granted belief that ethical certification will lead to better information in the market place and provide consumers with the ability to distinguish product offerings on social and environmental criteria

Findings



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- Current practices can serve to confuse and, more concerningly, legitimise some firms by making them appear more ethical than they are.
- NGO action ultimately prompted the more dubious eco-label to be withdrawn.
- Earlier action by the Government's Commerce Commission may have raised some doubts but did not, on its own, result in any change to the practice, which raises concerns that more market-based governance regimes cannot necessarily be relied upon.

Conclusion

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- A role for regulation in ensuring clearer rules and routines is indicated from our research
- There is a need to address the power imbalance through state regulation (defining and enforcing minimum compliance with environmental standards for example) as currently corporations have a lot of power to mislead in relation to ethical certification.