INTRODUCTION
APPROACHING FAIR TRADE: COFFEE IN COSTA RICA

'From the culture of small producers' proclaims the message on the tin of fair-trade coffee on my desk. Underneath the words a group of women and men in colourful dress stand in a sea of hessian sacks we presume contain coffee. The scene is obviously Latin American, though there is a mix of races, cultures and styles. The men wear Western shirts and long trousers; one sports a cowboy hat, another a baseball cap. The women are more traditionally dressed, and their clothes and their faces suggest a blend of the indigenous and the European: a *mestizo* culture. The picture illustrates the words, evoking an unknown world of coffee production; we cannot tell exactly where the people come from but we assume they are small farmers. They smile and look content, secure and comfortable. The photo alongside the logo contrasts with mainstream generic brands and is meant to reassure.

The stark, white background makes the message stand out, but the figures float free of context and much is left to the imagination. Ultimately, the picture and the words are a sign, a symbol, a promise, which is what allows the packaging to succeed. But we are left with a nagging doubt, a desire to know more about the people who grow our coffee and the conditions under which it is produced, and we are concerned that the deals that bring such an intoxicating, flavoursome stimulant into our daily lives might be exploitative. This wish to connect to and 'know' the producers in a world and a market that sets them apart inspires increasing numbers of people to buy ethically branded goods. But can the products be trusted, and do we really 'know'? The purpose of this book is to help meet that desire for knowledge by providing some of the missing context to the highly emotive subject of fair-trade coffee.

When I began to work on Latin America, coffee economies and fair trade some ten years ago, the idea of ethical commercial exchanges, in which consumers are invited to pay a premium to guarantee prices to producers, was in its infancy. The fair-trade concept had emerged after the Second World War and had maintained a niche

into the 1980s (Grimes 2005; Tallontire 2000). Emerging from the political fringes, it was popular among activists and favoured by development groups, but had yet to gain the popularity and exposure it now enjoys. Today, web searches return millions of hits – you can read testimonies from farmers, are persuaded by campaigns and publicity, and may buy merchandise online. Total sales of fair-trade goods in Britain have escalated from a reported £16.7 million in 1998, to £195 million in 2005.[1] But in the early 1990s there were little data available, and scholarly engagement with the subject was in its infancy. Information came from advocates of an alternative trading system, which gave a view from the North (Barratt Brown 1990; Coote 1992), or visiting representatives of farmers needing new trade outlets, who came to speak to activist groups. Consumption at that time was inspired more by politics than the quality of coffees such as Africafé or those promoted by the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, which were, by common consensus, almost undrinkable.[2] Nevertheless, such products were important precursors to the current vogue for alternative goods, since they showed that some consumers wished to politicise shopping.

The sea change in Britain began in the early 1990s with a conscious effort by a consortium of NGOs to enter the mainstream coffee market.[3] By 1993, their product, Cafédirect, had jostled its way onto the shelves of national supermarket chains, a timely achievement given the collapse of the International Coffee Agreement in 1989. As a pact between producer countries, this agreement had regulated the supply of coffee, curbed overproduction, and kept prices reasonably stable. With its demise, activists pointed to the sad plight faced by producers in an unregulated market; prices fell disastrously for a sustained period, with only a brief respite in the late 1990s. As has been graphically illustrated by the Oxfam campaign that implies a bitter brew by showing a cracked and leaking cup and a drinker looking distastefully into her mug, producers receive a very small part of the amount consumers pay for their daily cup of coffee (Gresser and Tickle 2002).[4] Popularising the issue put fair trade on the mainstream development map; for the first time it became more than a minority political campaign. But increasing visibility and success in the North generates its own tensions, reflected in debates among NGOs about 'mainstreaming'. The political legacy of oppositional politics remains, but there is also the capacity for business to incorporate fair trade into commercial strategies in order to extract more profit. A key question is the degree to which fair trade is compromised by success and dragged into the economic imperatives of exchange. To what extent are fair-trade goods distinct from corporate brands, given the propensity for the latter to claim the moral high ground and incorporate fair trade into their marketing strategies?[5]

There seems little doubt that shoppers want to show concern and solidarity with growers through acts of generosity. A central feature of the fair-trade project is the desire to draw producer and consumer together; this is why it puts real people on its packaging, and it is what the brand name Cafédirect is intended to evoke. In ethical consumption the aim is to break down and demystify the distance between parties in the exchange and accentuate the relation between them. One approach would then consider issues of 'connectivity' and shared meanings, with implications of intimacy or trust, operating through producer groups and alternative trading organisations, whose motives go beyond the purely commercial desire for profit.[6] The aim is to follow Harvey's call to 'lift the veil' on the conditions under which the things we consume are produced, and take seriously our material and moral connections to other people (Harvey 1990; Hudson and Hudson 2003; Lind and Barham 2004). Foodstuffs, it would seem, and exotic ones in particular, are remarkable vehicles for that desire. They often transcend great distance to enter the most intimate moments of our sensory lives (McMichael 2000). The combination of proximity and distance lends to foods a capacity to encompass and satisfy a broad range of aspirations (Pratt 2006). For example, part of the attraction of fair trade lies in its ability to evoke 'cultural others' and yet draw upon traditions of localised food and family-based subsistence activities that exemplify the production-consumption link in our mind's eye (Carrier 1995; Friedmann 1999). This allows it to draw popular support and appeal to consumers from across the political spectrum.

Conversely, there is a more pessimistic strain that identifies a tendency for alternatives to be appropriated by capitalist enterprise. It has been recognised since at least the days of Marx that the labour process and the origin of goods are obscured in modern production regimes. Indeed, the ability of capital to monopolise and then package the qualities of goods is a key component of the ability to generate profit (Harvey 2001). The implication is that an unresolved paradox lies in alternative trading relationships, which is exacerbated by commercial success. The contradiction lies in the desire to build and maintain an alternative economic space by revealing the conditions of production and forging connections between producers and consumers, and the enormous capacity of capitalist enterprise to monopolise those conditions by keeping producers and consumers at arm's length and profit from the distinctive qualities imparted to goods at the point of origin. Work on fair trade has to varying degrees, whether consciously or not, engaged with such conundrums.[7] Some scholars seem to reproduce an optimistic populism by pointing to the creation of production-consumption links, the extension of trust across space, and the construction of an alternative to mainstream

markets. Others draw on wider ideas about governance and regulation in the food industry (Lowe, Marsden and Whatmore 1994), from whence it is a small step to deconstruct the whole fair-trade edifice and show how it is subsumed to capital and market rationality.[8]

Despite diverging opinions on the transformative potential of fair trade, most studies to date focus on institutions and the formal relationships between organisations. Data are often generated from 'grey' literature, websites or interviews with managers and other executives. Producer groups are frequently understood from the perspective of preferential trade agreements, so that organisations come to exist only as 'fair-trade cooperatives', a misconstrued term that also appears in the media. In this way local, regional and national histories and struggles are elided from accounts. Another outcome of this institutional focus is a lack of engagement with or understanding of the complexities of the political economy of coffee growing. As a result farmers are often placed in a catch-all category of small producers or smallholders, so scholars tend to reproduce popular conceptions of coffee economies. There is little or no recognition of the enormous difference in livelihoods and options facing a farmer with a hectare or less, and a neighbour with five or even ten hectares of coffee, let alone large landowners who grow a little coffee as one agricultural option.[9] More disturbing still is the failure to acknowledge the invisible reserve army of landless poor, women, children and migrants who harvest coffee yet often lead the most precarious and marginal existence of all.

A second notable feature of the literature to date has been the lack of sustained attempt to explore fair trade as a specifically cultural concept, at least as this is understood within anthropology. Rather than taking culture to be a matter of conventions,[10] it is important to understand the commitments and meanings that people express and adhere to in their everyday lives. From there it is possible to relate fair trade to wider ethical ideas and the existing and longstanding literature on moral economies. Taking an ethnographic approach puts people, location and history into the account while at the same time opening up a discussion on the moral 'problem' of trade.

MEETING THE PRODUCERS

In August 1998 I flew to Costa Rica with my young family, driven by curiosity about coffee production and the ethical and political ideas that fair trade draws upon. After a few days we travelled north to the blustery town of Tilarán in the northwest highlands. It was a relaxing, friendly place with a little market, a range of small shops selling basic goods, a taxi rank, street hawkers, a municipal park, administrative offices and schools. There was even a coffee cooperative, but not a

coffee bush to be seen. Tilarán felt like an outpost; beyond lay the countryside, a land of rolling agricultural hills, with pastures and coffee plantations, interspersed with patches of woodland and larger areas of forest. I spoke to the hotel manager. His brother was a coffee grower and a key member of a producer cooperative called Coopeldos, which the receptionist described as 'the best coffee cooperative in the world'. His sister had a house to rent in a place also called El Dos. We hired an off-road taxi for the afternoon and paid a visit. The house felt neglected, but we had a close neighbour, and it was near the village shop, the telephone and the bus stop. We bought some basic secondhand appliances in town, loaded up a hired truck, and bounced out of Tilarán down 25 miles of rutted dirt track, towards our new home.

So, within a week of our arrival, my family moved into the somewhat damp bottom half of a house in rural Costa Rica. The settlement we came to is one of many dispersed across the countryside, with houses and farms strung out along a complex network of tracks. Outside our back door was a tropical garden full of exotic fruit, unknown animals, weird insects and colourful birds. Despite vague warnings about snakes and other dangers, this became the children's playground. Close by was forest, into which parrots flew in colourful clouds and where booming *mono congo* monkeys called at first light. To the left, in the shade of avocado trees that dropped their fruit on passers-by in alarming fashion, were rows of coffee bushes. To the right lay outhouses, a cattle shed and green pasture with grazing black and white cows, which made it strangely reminiscent of the England we had left behind.

We stayed in the village for a year; it became the only place the youngest of us remembered as home. We travelled out more than the locals; we went to visit other cooperatives and to San José to arrange visas, but like other villagers we put on better clothes for the bus trip to town and became mesmerised on our visits to the capital by the flashy displays in the alien, consumer-driven world of the downtown shopping malls. With the locals we rose early and lived the daylight hours, scrubbed our clothes by hand in a *pilón*, picked coffee in the warm but driving rain, and wandered the hillsides with our adopted dog, visiting neighbours and more distant farms and making new friends and acquaintances. I learnt about coffee from farmers and picked it till my fingers became wrinkled and raw. The cooperative staff taught me how they process the beans, and the manager told me about marketing, business strategies and the cooperative's history. Above all, I talked to local people about their lives and ideas, visiting them in their homes and in the fields, and I soon adapted my European *castellano* Spanish to the Central American accent and local vocabulary. Having a family made for

easy acceptance though my conversations, and social interactions, in keeping with local practice, gravitated largely towards other men.

Many of the people I spoke to at great length were elderly. There was Carlos, who lived in a house surrounded by coffee trees, set back from a track not 100 yards from where he was born more than 70 years ago. Retired now after a long life of work, he revelled in relaxation and discussion. He told me about his early life as a coffee farmer, an ox-driver, the string of packhorses he had used to hawk goods to market, and his disastrous attempts at cattle-ranching. He spoke of life before electricity and motor vehicles, of the days when his life was dedicated to brewing maize beer, before his conversion to evangelical Christianity. Even older was Amadeo, who had arrived barefoot in the 1920s, had gone on to build up a successful cattle business, but also grew coffee. He was most commonly found sitting on the veranda of his house, amazed at the tourist traffic threading its way to the nature reserve at Monteverde, but always ready to converse and tell stories about his life and the old days.

Other elderly residents had to get by on the meagre state pension, supplemented by whatever they could turn their hand to. There was Juan Pedro, always scraping around for work and money, who lived with his wife, daughter and grandson in a very bare and basic two-room house he had built on a small patch of unproductive donated land. Washing always hung outside his place, rain or shine, and the yard was decorated with old tins, plastic bags and rusting pieces of metal. More productive was the little garden opposite in which Felix grew a vast array of fruit and vegetables, as well as coffee that he processed and roasted at home. He kept chickens, and cows that he fed with grass collected from the roadside and transported by wheelbarrow back home. This earned him the sobriquet 'Mr Wheelbarrow', but the dairy products he produced gave vital income to feed his family. Carlomagno was equally keen on kitchen gardening but did it on a more extensive scale on the edge of the small coffee plantation that he still worked diligently, despite being in his sixties. Then there was Chico, a Nicaraguan who had been around as long as anyone could remember and was so old people made jokes about it. He lived down by a gurgling river in an old shack with an earth floor and invited us to visit to collect oranges from his trees, which he refused to sell although he accepted our 'donations'. Despite his crooked hand and bent back he was incredibly tough and continued to work long hours in the fields. We often met him shuffling along in the countryside as he moved from one job to another.

Two things struck me particularly about the lives of the people of the Tilarán Highlands. First was the resourcefulness of people in making a livelihood. Many people there have more than one income stream, often working in different types of agriculture and

combining this with other ways of earning money. For example, women have jobs in the cooperative offices or clean the houses of better-off families, cut hair or run small businesses, while husbands grow coffee and supplement this by producing fruit and vegetables, repairing appliances or doing waged agricultural work. If a family owns more land they are more likely to produce milk, or keep cattle for beef. But landless people have nothing to sell but their labour power. They can be reasonably successful, as Miguel was in his work as a carpenter, but most landless people generate income from a limited range of economic pursuits – coffee picking, milking and clearing land; outside of the harvest season, work can be hard to find. In this way the image, both in our minds and projected on packaging showing small landowning farmers producing only coffee, which is also a central theme in Costa Rican national identity, is revealed as a simplification. To describe these different roles I use the terms grower, farmer and producer to refer to landowners, and labourer, worker, *peón* or *jornalero* to refer to the landless. Pickers and harvesters are generally, though not always, without land. *Campesinos*, on the other hand, may equally own land, or not.

The second striking feature is the way people's lives are framed by social and moral context, particularly the family and the household. So although I have spoken of individuals it would be more correct to consider their activities as embedded in social relationships. As we shall see, extended families commonly work together on projects. What is more, if a person has no land, they often need to rely on wealthier, landowning neighbours to give them work. When this involves cooperation within and between families who own land there is an easier correspondence with the vision of a society of small producers evoked on the label of my tin of fair-trade coffee. But when agreements are between landowners and workers the relationship is framed by patronage and inequality; it can still be couched in terms of moral responsibility and social duty,[11] but it is more difficult to reconcile with the notion of fair trade for independent producers.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

To consider fair trade as a serious project for establishing ethical relations in the economy this book follows two avenues. The first arises from the material on Costa Rica, based upon extended anthropological fieldwork and the knowledge gained about coffee production and trade at the producer end. The purpose is to explore how growers and cooperative managers understand and engage with fair trade, and ground the deals in social practices, moral ideas and commitments at the local and regional level. At first sight this might seem to compromise the more global aspirations of fair trade, but

the deeper underlying purpose of establishing economic relations between producer and consumer as a moral relation and demystifying the distance between them remains. The second ambition emerges out of this; it draws on a long tradition in social and political thought on ethics and economics to show how the concept of fair trade is culturally embedded within enduring moral thinking about the economy. The distance between the worlds of production and consumption might never have been greater than in today's global economy, but the desire to know and make connections between those worlds has not been lost.

The book follows a strain of Western thought which pursues a desire to connect producers to their product. For Marcel Mauss (2002 [1925]) the spirit of the gift impels the product to return to the producer, creating social relationships as it does so. But Mauss also had socialist commitments and worked on behalf of consumer cooperatives to set up more direct links in the economy (Graeber 2001). Marx, on the other hand, begins at the other end; for him our engagement with markets and commodities is pathological because it ruptures producers' relationships with the things they produce, as well as the social ties that are the consequence of productive activity. In this view it is only by working to transform nature that we transform and so realise ourselves as truly, socially, human.

Reading backwards, the privileged connection we wish for producers with their products attracts us to peasant forms of provisioning in which family households are romantically assumed to work their own land, to produce what they consume, and consume what they produce. The idealised household exists in our imagination as an autonomous space outside the impersonal market, in which needs and wants are satisfied from nature and through the mutually supportive and reciprocal activities of family members. When this vision is compromised, because households cannot always produce all that they need, the model allows for exchanges between persons and households, not for profit, but so the house can reproduce itself by accessing things for use through known, personalised, local exchanges. This agrarian vision appears across the political spectrum positioning agricultural production as the privileged domain of economic activity.

The capitalist market presents the flip side of the coin. Here, the separation between producers and their product is near complete. Intermediaries in this scenario can be viewed as agents of exploitation because they step in to profit from the distance between producer and consumer. Our experiences of the world then come to be lived not through our productive activities in transforming nature, but as alienation; alienation from the things we produce, in our relationships with ourselves, with other people, and in our intercourse with the

natural world. Because activities based upon relationships then become troubled, the economy becomes a place of uncertainty, danger and exploitation. This essentially Marxian view does not have to be taken as universal; rather it is here understood as a Western cultural model, and it is used to interrogate the manifold attractions of fair trade.

In Northern industrial societies such ideas can but be viewed through a glass darkly, or glimpsed in alternative economic forms such as those proposed by fair trade. Even here the tendency is to worry about, and even give precedence to and so empower, the capacity for capitalism and the mainstream to appropriate and subvert. The case of Costa Rica presented in the pages that follow is somewhat different. As an idealised moral type, the model of the economy outlined above appears here in a starker, purer, light. If one surmises, as Gudeman and Rivera (1990) have done, that economic ideas and practices were transposed from the European context by settlers who came to farm in the new-found world, then by drawing on their ideas on the economy we can better understand our own concerns and, by extension, issues and agendas that have preoccupied economic anthropologists.

The first part of the book focuses on coffee cooperatives and the commodity market for coffee. In Costa Rica cooperatives are an answer to the problem of intermediaries, who trouble the small coffee producer at the centre of national identity. Cooperatives are therefore impelled by practical and moral concerns to maximise returns to producers and excise exploitation. Although fair trade aims to help in this mission, complications arise because it deals in a commodity, and because it operates in the arena of the market.

Chapter 1 presents the history of the Costa Rican coffee economy and charts both the establishment of the social democratic system of government and the rise of the cooperative movement. Following this, I look specifically at those cooperatives that engage with fair-trade deals, reveal the commitments expressed and strategies engaged upon by cooperative managers, and document their experiences of the fair-trade relationship. Although the evidence is that fair trade has played a significant role in helping these organisations achieve their ambitions, there are also difficulties and inconsistencies that need to be taken seriously. Some key tensions are those between cooperative managers' commitments to farmers and the scope to use fair trade to that end; managers' experiences of the fair-trade relationship; problems of participation in a limited market; and anomalies between the demand for quality and the mission to help needy beneficiaries.

The next chapter examines the case of the producer cooperative operating in the village: Coopeldos. The focus is initially upon the

history of the organisation and its explicit role in modernising coffee production and processing, and instilling development at the local level. Again, it is recognised that fair trade has a part to play in this process. From there, I consider the sometimes turbulent relations between the cooperative and its members, and locate this within the history of national struggles between producers and processors in Costa Rica. We learn that the demands and issues that farmers have long projected mirror those expressed by exponents of fair trade.

The following three chapters examine coffee production itself. An analysis of the political economy of coffee growing lifts the lid on the simplistic representation of small farmers working for themselves on their own land and growing coffee as a mono-crop. Obviously the realities of agriculture and political economy are far more complex than this in a wider setting; but it is a point that needs to be made and can best be done by close scrutiny of a specific, localised case. The second important point is that farmers and rural people do not consider the market and trade as an arena of life in which fairness is expected. Borrowing from local idioms I show how farmers consider commercial agriculture as an activity circumscribed by risk. Uncertainties emerge from the market, from the labour process and from nature.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 focus on different sources of risk; I look at how actors strategise in order to cope, depending upon the resources they can bring to bear and the options they possess. To view market agriculture as an arena of risk that requires strategies, as farmers and workers partly do, implies the application of a particular kind of means-ends maximising logic, commonly construed as market rationality. A side-effect of bringing this to view is to lose sight of social and moral inflections in the economy. What is more, because agriculture for the market separates producer from product and transforms the quality of things produced by work into quantities measured in money, it is an alienating activity. In as much as social relations in production are measured in quantities of output and return they become estranged relations. And so far as nature is seen as a source of maximising profit, so the human relationship with the environment becomes strained and unsustainable. Commercial agriculture, viewed as a mix of strategic engagement to negotiate risk, of coercion, and of exploitation, makes the whole notion of fair trade problematic.

So, if fairness is not to be experienced in trade, where can it be found? To answer that question the remaining chapters document the moral evaluations and commitments of farmers and rural people, which are also part of a sustained commentary on economic morality in Western culture. Here we find a reading of the economy in which humans' relations to themselves, to other people, and to nature, take an idealised and contrary form to the money economy.

Chapter 6 pursues the local history of the settlement of El Dos by 'pioneer' farmers who opened up the 'wild' interior in the early twentieth century. Ideas about political and economic rights and duties are embedded in Catholic social doctrine; the importance of and right to own and work land; the earth as provided by God for human sustenance; agricultural work as the source of all value; the household, the family and the farm as central to social life. All these are key themes voiced by local people, but they are also boldly stated in papal encyclicals and pastoral letters written by Central American bishops. In Chapter 7 the values attached to the family and the farm are shown to be extended to local-level associations and self-help groups, which step in to fill the void left by what is commonly understood to be an incompetent and corrupt state apparatus. The operations of local groups, as well as social relations more generally, are activated, inspired and regulated in everyday life by a series of morally laden local terms, such as humility and egoism. These concepts frame relationships and are used to attempt to constrain others' profit-seeking and risk-taking within the money economy.

Chapter 8 brings together ethical and political components by exploring the dissent expressed by farmers towards market intermediaries of all kinds, including, at times and from certain quarters, their cooperative. I propose that this relates back to the idea that working the earth produces value; intermediaries, who do not engage in manual labour and live from buying and selling, are seen to not properly work and to appropriate value from those who do. This idea underpins the rural people's moral evaluations of the economy. For example, to produce what one consumes and to live directly from the land as an individual or a family becomes an ideal and idealised activity in as much as no one mediates and profits from the value-creating activity of agricultural work.

In the Conclusion these observations, informed by fieldwork in Costa Rica, are linked to moral commentaries on the economy in Western culture. The key theme, which may relate to Romanticism (Kahn 1995), is the reaction to the experience of capitalism. In political economy people concerned with fair trade reject the excessive appropriation by intermediaries of value derived from nature through work. More tellingly, there is a cultural objection to the separation of producers from consumers, production from consumption and the worker from the value that labour creates. By following in the long tradition of attempting to make social and moral links in the economy, fair trade becomes more than a political struggle over the distribution of value down the coffee chain or a charity campaign to help people by 'gifting' them a fair price; it is also a cultural response to an increasingly impersonal market economy.