Sarah Besky 2013, *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 233 p

Peter Luetchford¹

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Sarah Besky's informative monograph on tea plantations in the northern Indian district of Darjeeling fills a gap in the literature on Fair Trade commodities and so complements ethnographic studies such as those on coffee (Jaffee 2007; Luetchford 2008; Lyon 2011), bananas (Moberg 2008), and chocolate (Berlan 2012; Ryan 2011). It will play a key contribution in correcting a general feature of the literature, reinforced by the Fair Trade industry more broadly. This is the tendency to exaggerate Fair Trade's transformative potential and importance to producers, whether farmers or workers or their representatives in market exchange relations. In that respect, it helps 'put Fair Trade in its place'.

Scholars who study production regimes where Fair Trade is operating are faced with a methodological and representational dilemma. Beginning with Fair Trade itself as the object of research, and couching a study in those terms, is likely to skew data as informants respond to a researcher as a 'Fair Trader'. This may well lead to exaggeration of the importance of alternative trading arrangements, granting it a centrality and agency, for better or worse, in the world of production that it often does not have. In that sense, the focus will be informed and framed by a logic that assumes Fair Trade is significant, independent of whether the work supports 'official discourse' or is more critical. Avoiding this trap requires a 'displaced' approach which involves looking at production economies in their broader context to explore how Fair Trade fits or is absent from the market strategies and experiences and moral worlds of workers and producers targeted by Fair Trade initiatives. This oblique approach allows a more nuanced and

realistic account of the transformative potential of Fair Trade. It entertains the possibility that Fair Trade may be peripheral to or in any case only exist within the market logic rather than the moral imaginaries of its target populations; those involved in the production of tropical primary economies in the global south. On the other hand, the danger is that in a displaced approach, Fair Trade may disappear from view so that we learn a lot about a production context but very little about Fair Trade and its operations; just as it is peripheral to producers, so it may become peripheral in the account.

The best studies of Fair Trade, like that under review here, walk a line between these two possibilities. Besky shows how Fair Trade is marginal, even absent from the everyday concerns of key actors, or how it is deployed in ways unimagined, for example, to further purely commercial ends (described by the term *bisnis*). Workers understand these business practices as extractive since they degrade the environment and destabilise plantation villages (p. 37). From the evidence in this study, based on over 2 years of fieldwork, Fair Trade stands accused of perpetuating dominant interests in the Darjeeling tea industry. This is so because rather than improve conditions for workers, it has revitalised plantations as commercial enterprises and increased owners' profits at the expense of more reciprocal, non-monetary, relationships and agreements. The fact that Fair Trade does little to advance workers' interests and can even count against them does not mean that tea pickers do not have practical or moral concerns. Besky shows how their interests and ideas emerge out of particular historical experiences, expressed as a 'tripartite moral economy', encompassing relations between workers, managers, and the agro-environment of the plantation.

The introduction sets up the main themes and the theoretical agenda of the book. Presented largely as a study of contending ideas about justice in the fieldwork site, we are shown how justice relates to 'place' through Darjeeling's

✉ Peter Luetchford
P.G.Luetchford@sussex.ac.uk

¹ University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RH, UK

status as a district producing a tea with geographical indication (GI), although I found the relation of GI to justice somewhat underdeveloped or tenuous. This was not the case with Fair Trade and the Gorkhaland movement, designated as justice as fairness and justice as political sovereignty, respectively. The introduction also sets up what I see as the primary frame of the book, the ‘tripartite moral economy’, which usefully opens up different and competing values in the empirical context.

The remaining chapters develop further the main themes and ideas. In chapter one, we learn about the colonial history of Darjeeling, its relation to empire, and how this is reproduced in ‘imperial ruins’, as both a kind of cultural legacy or ‘imaginary’ and a material environment. Central to this is the role of Darjeeling as a hill station for colonialists to seek respite from the plains, as an agricultural experimental station, and eventually as a plantation economy producing tea for increasingly discerning consumers in the West. Establishing the plantation economy required colonialists to first classify Darjeeling as a ‘wasteland’ ripe for appropriation, which then justified cultivation as a ‘garden’. Establishing plantations also meant resolving the ‘labour question’, achieved by drawing in migrant Nepali workers whose character and capacity for work set them apart from other hill tribes and lowland Indians. Crucially, at the end of this chapter, we are told of the distinction between two representations of the tea plantation. Workers use the word *kamān* to describe the oppressive and exploitative aspects of plantation life and the tasks they perform there. By contrast, planters, government official, tea buyers, and the tourist industry as outsiders evoke the plantation as a place of rest and relaxation by deploying the term garden. These two words, *kamān* and garden, respectively, are then used to set up the discussion in the next two chapters.

Chapter two, ‘Plantation’, documents the moral economy of plantation workers in their engagement with planters and their environment. They understand and represent their relationship to managers as based on rights and duties. An older order of reciprocal relations defined as *faciliti-haru* granted them access to such things as housing, schools, medicines, and spaces to cultivate and for recreation. A central argument to the book is that the resurgence of the tea industry with the rise of Fair Trade, geographical indication, and organic has escalated the erosion of *faciliti-haru* and its replacement with hard-nosed business practice, to the advantage of owners and managers and at the expense of workers. These business practices lead managers to over exploit and not care for the plantation environment, something that women workers counteract by adopting a pastoral role, expressed as caring ‘grandmothers’ to the tea bushes. Crucially, the tripartite moral economy is couched in non-monetary terms, meaning it is at odds with the framing of justice by Fair Trade in monetary and market terms. The book then moves logically from the moral economy of workers to an exploration of the plantation as garden, in a chapter on ‘Property’. Here, we learn

that the representations of Darjeeling and the plantation economy obscure its true nature, representing a sanitised commercial image for buyers, tea drinkers, and tourists that sometimes make workers complicit in their own exploitation.

The last two ethnographic chapters examine notions of justice. Chapter four, ‘Fairness’, further unpicks the operations of Fair Trade, to come to the by now common and largely accepted conclusion that it is ‘a way for consumers to tell a story about themselves through their consumption practices (...) a dream of equitable relations in empirically unequal productive conditions’ (p. 133). More interesting and telling in many respects is the evidence that Fair Trade neutralises local politics and trade union activism by proposing common interests between owners and workers, operationalised through the ‘Joint Body’. This cuts across alliances between workers who struggle against the market and the state to try to improve plantation conditions by evoking the Plantation Labour Act and engage in hunger strikes and other actions. It seems that Fair Trade is used by managers to evade such local labour law and undermine political activity around it. Where Fair Trade is shown to fail labour and aspirations for market justice or to engage workers in significant numbers, this is not the case when it comes to political sovereignty, the topic of the final empirical chapter. The ongoing but so far unsuccessful claim to sovereignty of the Darjeeling territory by the Gorkhaland movement is part of the larger picture and as such is central to understanding ideas about justice and political claims in the fieldwork site. As part of that ‘larger picture’, in my view, this information may have served the reader better earlier in the study, with later sections problematizing market justice, as opened up by Fair Trade.

Besky does a grand job of drawing the reader into her account, although at times for my money this is rather overplayed (do we really need to know about rattling tea-cups?) There are also questions to be asked about comparisons between tea cultivation and other tropical foodstuffs. Besky claims that coffee, cotton, and bananas are not ‘cultivated’ in the same caring way as tea. The evidence for this lies in Darjeeling tea workers’ use of the term “grandmother” to describe their relationship with the plants, which she says is not the case for other plantation crops. However, Moberg tells us that Caribbean farmers say growing bananas is akin to ‘taking care of babies’ (Moberg 2008; p. 48), and Central American coffee growers describe the new shoots that emerge after pruning as ‘daughters’. The use of such kinship terms by cultivators in different contexts raises interesting parallels that are denied here (p. 65–66).

In addition to these more empirical points, I have some reservations about aspects of the analysis as at times the text seemed unnecessarily overloaded with conceptual ideas. While I found the use of the tripartite moral economy compelling, I was less persuaded that food system studies and its focus on ‘relationships between economic actors and between

people and the things they produce, consume, and sell' (p. 16) really captured the heart of the study. Other intellectual influences claimed by Besky also seem to me a little misplaced. Bourdieu focuses on middle-class consumption and this is a study of tea production, and Appadurai builds on Simmel's notion of value as emergent from human desires, which I see as somewhat at odds with the moral economy approach pursued by E.P Thompson and James Scott. I would also have liked to have learned more about forms of ownership and management on the plantation. I remained uncertain as to whether owners, managers, and planters were different people with different roles or not. In that sense in my view, the study would have benefitted from more focus on material processes and forms of governance at the local level, and less on the representational and symbolic aspects.

Despite these caveats, this is an important book and one of the very few to really understand that Fair Trade is refracted through local processes, ideas, and politics and needs to be

understood in that light. It has an important and sober message to impart.

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