

Fruitful Links

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Growing bananas and tourism provide St. Lucia's wealth. But to look for any mutually enriching link between these two pivotal activities is to search in vain. Perhaps the only time the tourist will see bananas (except possibly on the way to and from the airport) is in a hotel fruit bowl. I was once told by a tour operator who specialises in the Caribbean that he could not recommend his clients go walking in the St. Lucian countryside in case they came across "farmers with machetes". So the ghettoised tourist has to be "protected" from the banana farmers, from members of the host community going about their daily tasks. And when I learned that cruise ships calling at St. Lucia are sometimes supplied with bananas out of containers from Venezuela, the gap between producers and consumers seemed even more offensive and absurd.

One of the reasons why Shelley Sacks' project is important is precisely because it demands that consumers make some connections with producers, albeit at a distance of three thousand miles. It pulls people together - it makes links where international forces have done their best to make sure that those logical and human encounters are never made. Of course, there have always been financial links between the Caribbean banana industry and tourism, much as there have always been gaps between producer and consumer. And, as today, that gap is an expression of the shape of international trade. When North American tourists first went to the Caribbean in the last decades of the 19th century, they went on the banana boats of the United Fruit Company (which became one of the largest companies in the world). Bananas went one way and tourists the other, both boosting the fortunes of the United Fruit Company, a prototype, stream-lined, vertically integrated multinational.

These days there are no tourists on the banana boat ("Every banana is a guest, every passenger a pest," was one slogan); there are just giant cruise ships that can hold two thousand or more passengers. When the Miami-based cruise ships tie up in Castries, St. Lucia, they look bloated and vulgar making the white banana boat tied up alongside look small and fragile. One could make similar connections (or comparisons) between the large, plastic-looking "dollar" banana from Latin America and the smaller, more low-tech and vulnerable Windward Island banana.

The banana's appearance makes for jokes in Europe and North America: of the Euro-specified shape, of banana skins, banana splits and banana republics. Yet in the real Caribbean, banana is not just not a joking matter, it is part of the collective imagination. "I look at pig, sometimes I think of goat, sometimes rabbit. But I always see banana," said one Dominican farmer. He was, in fact, musing on his limited options in the face of low banana prices, but he was also somehow describing a cultural attachment. Evan Jones' famous poem, Song of the Banana Man, is a hymn of praise to the Caribbean labourer; in response to the sneer of a tourist, it is an anthem of defiance: "Praise God an m'big right han, I will live an die a banana man".

The image stretches further in another Jones' poem, called "Lament of the Banana Man", in which he describes the life of a Caribbean immigrant worker in England without even mentioning a banana.

The colonial links are threaded through the history of the banana industry in the Caribbean. It was, after all, the British who, in the 1930s and 1940s, encouraged the Windward Islands to go into bananas in order to forestall possible social and political unrest in their impoverished colonies. It was a tactically good choice: the accommodating banana could be grown by peasant farmers on small-holdings while, at the same time, exported as raw material to Europe by the British marketing company Geest.

Bananas put a weekly wage into the pockets of the Caribbean farmer. Bringing at least in the better years, some spending power to the poorest communities. But that in itself was never able to transform the nature of the Caribbean economy. As in the days of sugar, the Caribbean produced, while the real wealth was made elsewhere.

Export agriculture (the export of raw material) remained the norm which explains, in part, why tourists eat imported fruit when they visit St. Lucia.

These distortions are a function of the global trading system. But Shelley Sacks' "social sculptures" bring us into contact with alternative ways in which the gaps can be narrowed and the encounters between consumer and producer be made something more of an equal partnership.