

CHAPTER 16

Coffee Beans and the Seeds of Labour: Child Labour on Guatemalan Plantations

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Until now, literature on the economic and social life of Guatemala has barely touched on child labour. Rather than hold a general discussion on that theme, however, we have chosen to begin with an observation of the country's large coffee plantations, a field covered by an ethnographical survey of ours. First we shall analyse what the actors living and working there understand by the term 'child'. Then, after a description of 'child' labour, we shall look into what the phenomenon means to the 'children' involved, their parents and, above all, the place it occupies within the broader context of the big plantation.

Child labour has become an unavoidable reality in various areas of Guatemalan economic life, in the urban informal and rural agricultural sectors in particular. The youngest children consistently play a crucial role in the daily work cycle of the highland farming economy. That role is certainly more ad hoc and of secondary importance in the large Pacific coast coffee, sugar and cotton plantations to the south, where working conditions generally comply with the child labour laws and the division of labour sees the heaviest duties of the agricultural calendar assigned to adult men. Yet there are still times of the year when, if only because of the sheer size of the plantations and the large numbers of families living there, hordes of children can be found at work in the fields, pastures and coffee estates.

Guatemala is one of the world's top ten producers of arabica. Coffee-growing alone accounts for over half of the country's GDP and brings in the bulk of its foreign currency. Guatemalan plantations (or *fincas*) are especially large in comparison to their counterparts in other parts of Latin America. Indeed, each covers an average of between 100 and 200 hectares, compared to 50 to 100 hectares in neighbouring countries (El Salvador, Costa Rica).¹

Finally, we should bear in mind that the coffee shrubs, on the modernized plantations at least, require a great deal of attention all year round. The fact

that they grow on steep wooded slopes makes mechanized farming out of the question and an abundant supply of labour a necessity.

The Large Coffee Plantations and Their Workers

These basic characteristic features create quite specific living and working conditions for coffee-workers. Indeed, the *fincas* accommodate a great many families, each of whom inhabits a small shack within the confines of an encampment. Some encampments are known to house no fewer than one hundred families. As a rule, each household has an adult male as the 'head of the family' and he is the only one benefiting from a permanent employment contract. This contract guarantees a wage, accommodation, social security, school for the children and a few advantages such as the right to use the river and gather dead wood around the plantation.

There are about 50,000 'permanent workers' on the *fincas* of Guatemala. But the figure has been steadily declining since the 1950s and the shift towards the employment with little job security of temporary workers (now numbering somewhere in the region of 300,000). They are sometimes referred to as 'satellites' or 'volunteers' and live on the outskirts of the plantation where they are given short-term work in return for a starvation wage. Many factors lie at the root of this situation, among them the considerable population growth on the coast and the one-way exodus of natives from the highlands to these supposedly 'wealthy' regions.² Generally speaking, the labouring populations currently inhabiting the *fincas* have very few family and property ties remaining with the highlands. They feel more at home in coastal society and more comfortable among people of mixed race (Ladinos or non-Indians) than the Indian farmers whom they largely tend to regard with disdain. It is true that Guatemala's piedmont regions were cultivated for coffee-growing between 1850 and 1880. Since then, though, the Indians have left their homelands to re-create a unique social and cultural environment within the relatively closed confines of the *fincas*.³

Division of Labour on the *Fincas*

Permanent jobs are theoretically an adult male preserve, with the women supposedly left in charge of domestic tasks. Officially, then, the only workers on the coffee plantation and, hence, the only wage-earners, are men. In actual fact, women are doing the work too, but their work is sporadic, often part-time and relatively less well paid with little scope for self-betterment. The plantation owners (*finqueros*) who lay down the *fincas* labour policies justify these disparities on the grounds that 'coffee is masculine in nature' and that women are incapable of doing 'steady and attentive work'.

Meanwhile, the sons of full-time workers often compete with one another for their fathers' jobs. Boys begin taking an interest in coffee plantation work

from a very early age and do their level best to play a role. Out of touch with their farming roots and penniless, most *fincas* children rarely harbour ambitions of setting themselves up as small-scale independent producers. The work is organized such that young adolescents and older single men sometimes form teams known as 'reserves', a term describing temporary labourers living with their parents in the plantation encampment. An average family is comprised of five members, which means there are large numbers of 'reserves' providing the *finquero* with an appreciable reserve labour force.

The 'reserves' still like to distinguish themselves from the other groups of casual labourers who come to work on the *fincas* at certain periods of the year. Indeed, 'reserves' present themselves as the plantation 'natives' and look upon the others as 'foreigners' who are out to steal their jobs and, although they rarely say so openly, their women. The casual workers originating from outside the *fincas* have their own hierarchies too. The *finquero* and full-time workers differentiate 'seasonals' from 'day labourers': of Indian extraction, the former are recruited in groups and stay on the *finca* for a few months, while the latter are employed individually and leave the *finca* at the end of the day.

So despite its apparent homogeneity, the plantation is riddled with socio-economic and cultural divisions. Far from being a world apart, the *finca* often reproduces, in an albeit original form, the particularly strained social relations characterizing Guatemala as a whole.⁴

Coffee-picking and Child Labour

THE WORK-DAY At harvest time, *fincas* are a positive hive of activity. In the west of the country where we conducted our survey, harvest stretches from mid-August through to mid-December with phases of greater and lesser intensity. Not all the coffee fields are located at the same altitude, so the beans are not all ripe and ready to pick at the same moment and the same areas need going over several times at intervals of some weeks. A successful harvest therefore requires a large work force: on an 'average' 100-hectare plantation employing a permanent force of fifty workers, the wage-earning population can grow to around 300 people. This figure varies from year to year and includes the permanent workers, most of their wives and elder children (the 'reserves') as well as the 'seasonals' and 'day labourers'.

During the four-month harvest period, women are paid, like men, according to the quantity picked. Ripe beans are picked off the shrubs and dropped into wicker baskets hanging at waist height on a cord passed around the back of the picker's neck. Once filled, the baskets are emptied into large nylon sacks. A full sack holds about 50 kg of beans. At the end of the work-day, i.e. towards 3 or 4 p.m. when the rainfall becomes too heavy, the workers carry their sacks down to the *finca* coffee-processing plant on their backs. Each worker harvests an average of two to three sackfuls a day unless, that is, the plantation-owner has decided to impose a limit.⁵

At harvest time, the work-day can begin as early as 5 a.m., although the women will have begun preparing the meals at 3. Generally speaking, the men are first out of the house. They are progressively joined by the rest of the family. The young girls of the house bring them a breakfast of corn cakes and a glass of coffee. Then, at around 11 a.m., those same girls return home to fetch the lunch, occasionally in the company of their mothers. This is tough work given the topography and sheer expanse of the plantations. The journey between the coffee fields and the encampment sometimes takes three-quarters of an hour each way.

THE WORK OF THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN For women, the coffee harvest means additional work on top of their usual domestic duties. Recruited as 'reserves', they are accompanied in the coffee fields by their 'children' – those not themselves employed as 'reserves'. In actual fact, the women regard children as belonging to one of two categories: 'infants' or 'youths'. The former include babies and toddlers, while the latter are able to pick beans without damaging the shrubs. This is a major responsibility because if they do cause any damage their parents have a heavy fine to pay to the plantation-owner. It should be said that this family-based division of labour is not subject to any rules laid down by the *finquero*. The women are the sole judges of, and the only ones responsible for, their offspring. Another point to note is that during the harvest season, the children abandon their schooling. And not long after that are the national school holidays: from mid-October to mid-December when the coffee crops are at their best.

It is difficult to say how much of an economic contribution is made by the 'infants'. On the one hand, they constitute an unquestionable burden for their mothers, slowing them down. On the other hand, however, the toddlers pick the scattered fallen coffee beans up off the ground. Naturally, when all is said and done, this activity does not count for very much in economic terms; but it does mark a start to a small child's technical training in coffee-farming. As for the 'youths', their contribution is much more easily discernible: not only do adolescents of both sexes do the picking, but the girls also take charge of emptying the wicker baskets into the sacks while the boys drag the sacks along the rows of coffee shrubs, keeping up with the main body of pickers.

Young boys, by the way, go for this punishing work with gusto in order to show that they have the qualities required to become good workers. Each gesture is in fact a perfect imitation of their seniors. To prove just how hard they have been working, they roll their shirts up to the chest to let the air get to their bellies; they tilt back their straw hats and wipe their brows with the back of a hand; they noisily clear their nostrils between forefinger and thumb. Frequently, the 'youths' also race one another for the title of the fastest coffee-sack dragger on site. They do this in the hope of attracting the attention of the plantation supervisors. Even though it mostly takes the

form of game-playing, young boys have already learnt what to do to become good coffee-workers. Notwithstanding their tender age, they are thus clearly showing their keenness and social ambitions.

The Child's Status on the Plantations

WHAT DO THE PARENTS DO ABOUT IT? Legally, a 'child' is considered to be any individual under the age of fifteen years, but the law in fact forbids only paid employment for the under-twelves. So it is not entirely illegal for children aged between twelve and fifteen to be earning money, especially in agricultural regions. On the majority of *fincas*, however, the under-fifteens are paid nothing at all for the labour they supply. And, as we shall see, this is a situation encouraged not just by the *finqueros*, but also by the men, women and children whose position on the plantations is one of insecurity and dependency.

Naturally, *finqueros* fully capitalize on the ambiguities in Guatemalan legislation, for they are perfectly aware of the importance of 'youth' labour. They know full well that women could never gather as much coffee as they do without the assistance of 'youths'. They also know that the 'youths' are in no stronger a position than women as regards pay demands. Under such circumstances, the planters knowingly use Guatemalan legislation to justify their recruitment policies. In some cases, they even manage to pass it off as a matter of doing people a favour, since it enables youngsters to become familiar with 'the ways of coffee' irrespective of whether or not it is against the law.

Women for their part are only too happy to be able to work 'full-time' and earn a 'proper worker's wage'. For once, they have a recognized economic role on the *fincas*. And they know that if they were to petition the planter with wage demands, he would regard it as a sign of profound ingratitude. Equally, such demands might implicitly be taken to mean that they are unable to work without another person's assistance. Then the planters would feel right to have assumed women to be neither 'steady, confident nor attentive' enough in their work. So mothers are unable to demand wages for their children without putting their own jobs at risk.

As for the men, they largely stay out of it. They are well aware of how sought-after their permanent worker status is and have no intention whatsoever of jeopardizing it for the sake of an extra few pennies. It is equally likely that the men regard the difficult phase of childhood as a period of initiation that is necessary to become a fully-fledged picker. To some extent, they are of the opinion that since they themselves had to undergo a similar trial, there is no reason why their own sons should not follow their example.

Besides, there is little guarantee that young people, especially boys, would support their parents should they eventually decide to put in a claim for an additional wage. For they are not blind to the fact that permanent worker

posts on the plantations are scarce and that they have to demonstrate their obedience if they wish to stay in with a chance. In other words, competition for jobs on the *fincas* is such that the children assimilate the essential qualities of a 'good worker' as soon as they can – obedience, stamina, loyalty – without worrying about their working conditions of the moment.

Finally, beyond these socio-economic and cultural particularities, we cannot help but notice that there is not much of a tradition of trade unionism, or even plain protest, in the world of the coffee-worker. Contrary to the huge coastal sugar plantations, relations between *fincas* workers and bosses remain personal, even if they are rarely described as such by the actors themselves. Hence, whenever work-related tensions and conflicts erupt they are more likely to be settled via an informal face-to-face arrangement rather than through stereotyped written rulings. To put it another way, each individual seeks individual protection from the boss to the detriment of the community, which does not necessarily mean to say that they do not feel a sense of belonging to, or solidarity with, the community in other areas of social life.⁶

DOMINATION, INTERNALIZING DOMINATION, SOCIAL ADVANCEMENT Within the context of the large Guatemalan coffee plantations, we see clearly that the problem of hiring children during harvest represents an overlap of very distinctive fields: it reveals the importance of the areas of legality and economics while at the same time stressing the strength of the actors' social representations and aspirations.

On the one hand, the laws currently in force in Guatemala obviously provide the planters with the legal grounds they need to justify their employment of children without pay. Yet in the minds of lawyers, economists, politicians and, hence, planters, there is nothing unfair about these laws and nothing abusive about applying them. On the contrary, they even see them as serving to shore up a long tradition of farming without which the Indians, farmers and workers would be lost. Beneath this sort of legislation and reasoning, we recognize the utilitarian and idealistic thinking of the representatives of the Guatemalan economic elite which includes the planters.

The planters do not see it as a matter of surreptitiously scooping up a few coffee beans for free via the intermediary of children. They actually believe they are giving those children the opportunity to prove themselves and, hence, become socialized within the confines of the plantation. *Finqueros*, in other words, are convinced that they have a bona fide mission to civilize children from a humble background. Sometimes the *finquero* and a worker's son are even united in a tutelage style of relationship. To the parents of the protégé, such a relationship means social recognition for the whole family and the near certainty that their offspring will have secured a firm footing for their future career.

Coffee plantation-workers hardly put the problem of child labour in terms of exploitation.⁷ If they did so, it would be akin to opposing the social

system and established order of the plantation, which would seriously jeopardize their position there. They would then lose their jobs and accommodation to become sub-proletarians after the fashion of the numerous families crowding the surrounding hamlets on the outskirts of the *fincas*.

We should also remember that the insecurity of their situation places coffee-workers in a position of great emotional dependency towards the plantation and the planter. So the workers do not express any particular anti-*finquero* sentiment as regards their children's labour. As mentioned above, parents view the participation of younger members of the family in the work as a kind of initiation into adulthood. Finally, the children themselves for their part set the (often game-like) rules for that initiation which raises their hopes of achieving the dream of social advancement. Games here unquestionably help the very young to internalize the domination.

The nature of the laws in force and the economic insecurity and emotional dependence of the workers are among the most decisive factors contributing to the form, function and direction taken by child labour on the coffee *fincas*. When all is said and done, *fincas* children are the victims of an unbending, hierarchical, competitive and precarious established legal, economic and social order; what is more, they are the main agents responsible for the reproduction of that order. Their complex legal, economic and social status makes them the actors of a comprehensive system with which they identify and which, in the absence of other prospects, they help to perpetuate.

Within this context, it is understandably going to take a lot more than merely amending the labour laws to alter the system as a whole. And changing mentalities is not a measure that can just be taken and steered through at will. Child labour is part of a complex body of interrelated dynamics, none of which can be looked at in isolation from the others. Instead of adopting a moral or ethical stance, we really ought to be asking ourselves how the various different actors participating in a given established order might work together to change it thoroughly and without producing the sort of perverse side-effects which would have a negative and irreversible impact on the children's affectivity and socialization.

Notes

1. For more on the coffee economy in general, see Daviron and Lerin (1990); on the various Latin American and African societies and coffee farming communities, see Tulet et al. (1994).
2. For more on the various types of migration in Guatemala and their socio-demographic importance, see Bataillon and Le Bot (1975).
3. Their highly unusual social organization is studied in depth in our ethnological thesis (Suremain 1994).
4. Le Bot (1992) offers the most complete study of the conflicting and violent dynamics that have been structuring Guatemalan society for the last thirty years.

5. Some *finqueros* demand that 'seasonals' and 'day labourers' gather no more than two sackfuls of coffee a day so that more might be left for the plantation's 'native' workers.

6. Methods of resolving plantation labour disputes are complex. For an illustration of a case where an incidence of food poisoning sparked off a mass protest of permanent women workers, see Suremain (1992).

7. The same cannot be said with such certainty of the highland Indian populations migrating to the plantations on a seasonal basis. Indian farmers are actually very often critical about life on the *fincas*. However, they let their views be known only once they have returned to the home community. On the living and working conditions of Indians on sugar and coffee plantations of Guatemala, see respectively Caldera (1979), Schmid (1973) and de Suremain (1993).

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