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# Contesting Ethical Trade in Colombia's Cut-Flower Industry: A Case of Cultural and Economic Injustice

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## ABSTRACT

Based on a case study of Colombia's cut-flower industry, this article draws strategically on Nancy Fraser's model of (in)justice to explore the mutual entwinement of culture and economy. It examines responses by cut-flower employers and their representatives to ethical trade discourses demanding economic justice for Colombia's largely female cut-flower workers. It argues that employers' misrecognition of both ethical trade campaigners and cut-flower workers may serve to deny and redefine claims of maldistribution. Through a 'home-grown' code of conduct, employers also seek to appropriate ethical trade in their own interests. Finally, a gender coding of worker misrecognition ostensibly displaces workers' problems from the economic realm to the cultural, offering the 'modernity' of full capitalist relations as the solution. In further examining the 'responses to the responses' by workers and their advocates, the contestation of ethical trade is highlighted and its prospects assessed.

## KEY WORDS

Colombia / culture / cut flowers / economy / ethical trade / fairtrade / misrecognition / Nancy Fraser

## Introduction

Even the most material economic institutions have a constitutive, irreducible cultural dimension; they are shot through with signification and norms. Conversely,

even the most discursive cultural practices have a constitutive, irreducible political-economic dimension; they are underpinned by material supports. (Fraser, 1995: 72)

The relationships between the cultural and the material, between processes of meaning-making and political economy, have long preoccupied sociologists. As part of her theory of justice, feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser has elaborated a dual perspectival approach to culture and economy that takes both seriously, recognizing their interpenetration and mutual irreducibility (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 48). This article draws strategically on Fraser's conceptual framework in a case study of the cut-flower industry in Colombia. Research privileging material conditions for Colombian cut-flower workers (Farné, 1998; Friedemann-Sanchez, 2006; Meier, 1999; Stewart, 1994) outweighs more cultural approaches (Talcott, 2003); we seek to connect the two and insist that culture matters in studies of the labour process. Claims for economic justice for Colombian cut-flower workers have recently been expressed via European consumer campaigns for ethical trade. Through interviews with cut-flower plantation owners and workers and staff of the Colombian flower exporters association, *Asocolflores*, as well as by drawing upon secondary sources, we analyse responses to these campaigns.<sup>1</sup> We argue that producers deny, redefine, appropriate and displace claims for economic justice for their workers, deploying discursive and material strategies to do so. We also consider the 'responses to the responses' by workers and campaigners, thereby highlighting ethical trade as a political struggle, its premises contested and re-contested.

The first section of the article situates cut-flowers within Colombian society and a global economy. Thereafter we introduce Fraser's justice model, paying particular attention to her concepts of (mis)recognition and (re/mal)distribution. Attention then turns to the cut-flower campaigns, seen as an affirmative strategy to address claims of economic injustice for cut-flower workers. The first employer response considered, denial, is shown to draw on a discourse valorizing the industry as saving Colombia from drug production. The second response, redefinition, is argued to rely on disparagement of workers. Thereafter the (selective) appropriation of the campaigns by employers is considered, in terms of the inception of a 'home-grown' code of conduct, entitled *Florverde*. The final section analyses a training programme for workers that posits gender conflict in the family as the source of workers' problems, displacing the apparent source of injustice from the economic realm to the cultural. The broad aim of the article is to explore the importance of discourse and meaning both in the processes that determine material outcomes for particular workers (for example, their wages, working conditions and labour representation) and in struggles to improve such outcomes.

## Situating Colombia's Cut-Flower Industry

Colombia's cut-flower industry began in the 1960s on small family-owned farms. Its phenomenal growth from the 1980s, becoming second only to the Netherlands, relates to economic globalization and neo-liberalism. The

Colombian state, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund promoted cut-flowers as a non-traditional export to generate foreign exchange. Tariff reduction or elimination, flexibilization of labour, lower corporate taxation, recruitment of foreign investment and technology transfers fuelled the sector's growth, as did a continuation of protectionist policies such as state subsidies (Gwynne and Kay, 1999; Livingstone, 2003: 99). The 1990s saw both increased concentration and the arrival of US multinational Dole (Mellon, 2004). Most cut-flower production surrounds the capital Bogotá, a locale benefiting from an international airport and a climate conducive to year-round production. In 2005 Colombia had a US\$900 million share of the global export market (Proexport, 2006), the US taking over 80 percent of exports followed by the UK buying US\$37m worth of flowers (Dinero, 2006). Up to 50 different varieties of cut flower are grown but carnations and roses predominate.

The industry is labour-intensive, employing 80–90,000 people directly and 50–80,000 indirectly, mainly in packaging and transportation (Asocolflores, 2005a; Mellon, 2004). Classed, racialized and gendered divisions in Colombian society are reproduced in floriculture. The mainly male owners come from the elite land-owning classes and are white, westernized and educated. Administrative and supervisory staff, including in *Asocolflores*, are generally middle class, identifying with plantation owners. They tend to be male in the upper echelons, female lower down and all light-skinned mestizos, so-called mixed race descendants of indigenous and white parents.<sup>2</sup> The majority of workers are indigenous mestizos, darker-skinned descendants of indigenous, black African, and European communities. Up to 80% of workers are female, originally the wives and daughters of local male sharecroppers or tenants, but more recently rural-urban migrants who prefer cut-flower work to the main and even more poorly paid alternative, domestic service (Madrid, 2003). Migration in Colombia is both voluntary, in response to the paucity of agricultural livelihoods and increasing landlessness, and involuntary, following displacement by political violence (Meertens and Segura-Escobar, 1996). Such migration helps to maintain a pool of female labour for the cut-flower sector, celebrated as 'cheap' in an industry guidebook aimed at potential investors (Talcott, 2003: 470).

Cut-flower workers and producers in the Colombian *cultivos* (plantations/greenhouses) are situated at one end of a process of international trade that might be characterized as a 'commodity chain' (Leslie and Reimer, 1999). Actors further down the chain include distributors, wholesalers and retailers of cut flowers, with consumers situated at the other end. While producers may be powerful players in the Colombian context, they are vulnerable to competition and to losing European market share to countries such as Kenya (Dolan et al., n.d.: 14).

## Recognition and Redistribution

Nancy Fraser's dualist approach to inequality and injustice, first set out in 1995 and established through her book *Justice Interruptus* (1997), provides the

analytical tools for this case study. Fraser has argued that for heuristic purposes socio-economic injustice, termed maldistribution, should be distinguished from cultural injustice, termed misrecognition, although the two reinforce one another dialectically (1995: 72). Socio-economic (or class) injustice is rooted in the unequal power relations of the economic order and comprises three elements: exploitation (appropriation of the fruits of one's labour); economic marginalization (restriction to undesirable or poorly paid work, or denial of access to income); and deprivation (denial of an adequate material standard of living) (Fraser, 1997: 13). Cultural (or status) injustice is rooted in social patterns of representation and is also three-fold: cultural domination (subjection to alien standards of judgement); non-recognition (subjection to cultural invisibility); and disrespect (routine subjection to malign stereotypes and disparagements) (Fraser, 1997: 14).<sup>3</sup>

Fraser's concern is, of course, not merely to interpret the world but to change it. Both maldistribution and misrecognition must be remedied if the norm for a just society (developed in a refinement of her original work), namely parity of participation, is to be achieved (2000). She distinguishes affirmative remedies from transformative ones, the former aiming 'to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 74). While affirmative remedies may be limited in their scope and bring unanticipated problems, Fraser does not discount them. This is both because they may be all that is practical and because they may constitute 'nonreformist reform', with the capacity to 'change more than the specific institutional features they explicitly target' and 'alter the terrain upon which later struggles will be waged' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 79).

Fraser's dualist conceptualization is not without its critics, notably Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, and Axel Honneth (see Lovell, 2007, for a full account). Nonetheless, her insistence that there are both cultural and economic aspects to injustice, and that 'status injustices can be just as material as class injustices' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 67), resonates with contemporary work synthesizing the cultural and the material. For example, social epidemiologist Wilkinson (2005) demonstrates cogently that denial of respect, esteem and autonomy are highly detrimental to physical and mental health; in Fraser's terms misrecognition is, literally, written on the body. Sayer's recent book on social class highlights the interplay between economic and cultural injustice: an unequal distribution of goods and opportunities (maldistribution) fuels class contempt (misrecognition), in that it limits the potential for the kinds of achievements likely to be valorized (2005). Meanwhile, the cultural sociology of work is also concerned to bring the status order into play. Writing about the UK rail industry, Strangleman suggests that disparagement by management of the values and traditions of older railway workers has served both to blame such workers for industry failure and to legitimate their mass redundancy (2004). Moreover, Ehrenreich's first hand account of dead-end jobs in the USA illustrates a workplace authoritarianism premised on management assumptions

that all workers are potential idlers, drug addicts or shop-lifters (2001). On the other hand, Lamont (2000) and Hodson (2001) detail how workers deploy negative representations of managers to redraw the status hierarchy and ascribe themselves dignity and moral worth.

Fraser has since extended her model to incorporate a third sphere of injustice, the political (2005a), but our concern is with her original perspectival dualism. We attempt to spin off it productively in a concrete, localized case study. The cut-flower campaigns privilege socio-economic injustice and seek redress within these terms (e.g. better wages and working conditions). Our analysis of their reception and contestation also addresses the cultural realm, that is, the symbolic order of meanings, values, identities and discourses. Such a concern is motivated, first, by Fraser's insistence that maldistribution is usually accompanied by misrecognition; cultural injustice is distinct from but may mutually reinforce economic injustice (and vice versa). Second, such a focus is necessary because the cut-flower labour market is explicitly gendered and racialized, and gender and racial injustices are what Fraser terms 'bivalent', 'rooted simultaneously in the economic structure and the status order of capitalist societies' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 19). Third, it is important to consider the discursive/cultural realm because it constitutes a potential sphere of intervention, of agency, from which misrecognition and maldistribution may be contested.

## Cut-Flower Campaigns for Economic Justice

Academic and NGO research into wages and working conditions in Colombia's cut-flower sector shows them to be 'less than rosy',<sup>4</sup> constituting a charge of maldistribution. Workers generally receive the minimum wage but this denies them an adequate living standard, meeting less than 45 percent of a family's basic living costs (Oxfam, 2004: 7). Moreover, the 'surplus value' extracted is substantial: the flowers one woman picks daily retail for US\$600–800 whereas her minimum wage is US\$2 (Oxfam, 2002: 85). Intensive chemical use, often without adequate training or protective clothing, poses substantial risks to workers' health (Tenenbaum, 2002), as do extremes of heat and cold in the greenhouses (Talcott, 2003: 472). Two-thirds of workers report work-related health problems, ranging from headaches and nausea to miscarriages and neurological complaints (ILRF, 2003a). Work intensification at peak periods may involve involuntary overtime and promote repetitive strain injuries (Talcott, 2003). Short, fixed-term contracts predominate, although many employees work continuously in the same plantation for years (ILRF, 2003a), and women workers are routinely dismissed when pregnant (Oxfam, 2002: 85). Sub-contracting is also common, increasing flexibility for employers and devolving responsibility for pay and working conditions (Madrid, 2003: 114).

Labour organization has long been one way to contest maldistribution, but Colombian flower workers organizing to improve their lot face huge obstacles from both capital and state. Colombia has been described as 'the most dangerous

place in the world to be a trade union activist' (ICFTU, 2002: 1); far from protecting citizens who seek to organize themselves, the state typically constructs them as subversives who need to be 'neutralized' (Pearce, 1990: 230–9). State-sponsored repression in the 1980s saw the demise of most independent trade unions representing flower workers, although NGOs including *Corporación Cactus* have continued to document conditions and support workers where possible (Talcott, 2003: 473–8). In 2001 an independent national trade union of flower workers was formed, UNTRAFLORES, but dismissal of or discrimination against union members followed (ILRF, 2003b). This is how Rosa,<sup>5</sup> one of the workers interviewed, described her experiences:

At least [for] me, if I want to go and work in another company I can't because I'm marked as a unionist and they won't hire me ... It is similar to what happens when you are accused of stealing and are pigeonholed as a thief, as a delinquent and they say 'This one no, she is a revolutionary' and they don't even say that anymore, they say 'This one is a *guerrillera*' ... this is what happens when we work with the unions you are branded as a *guerrillera* in all the companies.

Employers cooperate to exclude workers who seek to organize, justifying this as an 'obvious' response to a *guerrillera* (literally meaning an armed peasant waging a partisan war). Short-term contracts and the rotation of workers between locations also militate against their organization (Talcott, 2003: 473). This is the context in which the cut-flower campaigns must be understood. Picking up, assessing, and codifying workers' injustice claims, campaigners take them to a new audience: European consumers.

Campaigns promoting fairer trade between majority world producers and minority world consumers proliferated in the 1990s (Barrientos, 2000; Jenkins et al., 2002). The European cut-flower campaign, a Swiss-Colombian initiative, was inaugurated in 1990. In the run-up to Mother's Day, a key moment for cut-flower gifts, information about poor wages and working conditions in Colombian floriculture was circulated to consumers in Basel, asking them to write expressing concern to the Colombian Embassy (VIDEA, 2001: 5). Thereafter a group which became known as Flower Coordination Switzerland began negotiations with Swiss supermarkets about a flower label (VIDEA, 2001: 6) and the campaign spread across Europe. In 1998 a European coalition of NGOs and trade unions proposed an International Code of Conduct for the Production of Cut-flowers (ICC), based on International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, environmental standards and human rights (Brassel and Rangel, 2001). The cut-flower campaign mobilized consumers to pressurize producers and retailers to commit to the ICC and to buy 'fair' flowers where available (a so-called 'boycott').

As we and others have argued elsewhere, the premises of consumer campaigns and associated codes and/or labels are worth questioning (Madrid, 2003; Nicholls and Opal, 2005; Wright, 2004). Have workers been marginalized and misrepresented by campaigns owned and controlled elsewhere and founded on the recuperative potential of consumption? Do these initiatives privilege and

legitimate consumer pleasure over and above labour rights? The campaigns are certainly an intervention Fraser would term affirmative not transformative, dealing with outcomes rather than origins. Nonetheless, they are both pragmatic, given the stranglehold on the organization of Colombian labour, and a discursive intervention that may have economic and political impact.

## Denying Claims of Economic Injustice: Flowers not Cocaine

A common response to the cut-flower campaigns by the employers interviewed is to deny their validity, construing them as dangerously mistaken and contrasting them with their own benevolent employment practices. Antonia,<sup>6</sup> a company owner, expressed her anger that the campaigns were ignorant of the efforts being made to improve working conditions for workers who would otherwise be in the drug trade. She portrayed campaigners as irresponsible and conspiratorial. Fabiola,<sup>7</sup> an employee in the legal section of *Asocolflores*, asked why campaigners do not officially report the labour law violations they highlight; why they are only active around Valentine's Day and Mother's Day; and why they create such a negative and damaging image of Colombia. She added that there is no evidence that flower production is a dangerous activity and that claims to the contrary anger her. At an institutional level an *Asocolflores* report puts it thus:

[The Colombian flower exporters] had become the target of campaigns in some European countries which, rather than stressing their export success and job creation ... chose to point out several deficiencies in human resource management and chemical pesticide use. Much of the information used as a basis for these criticisms, it must be pointed out, was either [wrong] or simply misleading. (*Asocolflores*, n.d.: 7)

It is noteworthy that employers invoke public gains or losses not private ones; the success of the industry is represented in national terms, not in relation to owners' profits, and the threat to profitability is represented as a threat to the whole economy, not to company owners. Such framing reflects a discourse that employers have built up over time about the cut-flower industry, one that puts it at the heart of Colombian nationalism and through which they seek to protect their interests. For example in 1997, as the USA threatened trade sanctions, the industry resisted by emphasizing the quantity of employment generated. A Colombian journalist took up the case:

Judged by the amount of exports, Colombia's flower industry has the sweet smell of success. But the 125,000 people who, directly or indirectly, depend on flowers for their living know that roses and thorns go hand in hand ... sanctions would seriously affect the country's economy. (Molina, 1997)

Then in 2000, when *Asocolflores* was lobbying to keep tariff advantages on cut-flowers,<sup>8</sup> they were presented as an alternative to drug production: 'Since passage of the Andean Trade Preference Act (ATPA) in 1991, Colombia's flower industry has employed thousands of people in rural areas who might

otherwise have ended up working in illicit crops, industry officials say' (Christian Science Monitor, 2000). An article in *Export America* pursues the theme: 'that *licit* crop – fresh cut-flowers – is a shining example of the hard work that Colombians are doing to combat the "drugs and thugs" image that so plagues their country' (Anglin, 2003, original italics). Indeed juxtaposing flower and cocaine has a long history; in 1990 former Colombian president Cesar Gaviria put it thus: 'To save Colombia from cocaine, buy its roses'.<sup>9</sup>

A set of binaries is deployed in the flower-versus-cocaine discourse to give it powers of persuasion: sweet, fresh, legal cut-flower production is favourably contrasted with sour, dirty, illegal coca production. Moreover, it is asserted that the latter will increase unless the former is maintained. However, there are problems with this discourse. First, cut-flower production is located in the Andes, whereas coca production is mainly in the Amazon forest and other remote areas. Second, most of the workers involved in cut-flower cultivation are female household heads, whereas those involved in coca cultivation are either young single men or entire families (Molano, 1992). Third, it is women migrants to the cities who constitute the cut-flower labour force, while coca producers are mostly small-holders pushed to the agricultural frontier by large landowners (Molano, 1992).

Moreover, as we have already seen, cut-flower workers and their advocates refute the story of a clean, sweet-smelling industry in favour of one of economic exploitation and injustice. In the end, the denial strategies of employers may face an uphill struggle as they are met with reaffirmation by workers, who continue to testify to economic injustice (Madrid, 2003; Talcott, 2003), and as evidence of the same is picked up and disseminated by human rights organizations, church groups, development NGOs, environmental groups and the media (Organic Consumers Association, 2003; Stewart, 1994; Watkins, 2001). Moreover, internet technology is increasingly used to despatch immediate information about labour abuses and mobilize consumers to raise objections directly with *Asocolflores* and the Colombian government, via e-mail campaigns (ILRF, 2003b; War on Want, 2005).

### **Redefining Claims of Economic Injustice: 'Othering' Workers**

A second (and perhaps less deliberated) discursive response to the campaigns can be discerned in the following interview extracts from William,<sup>10</sup> a *cultivo* owner. He begins by reiterating claims of unjustified smearing by campaigners, concentrating particularly on environmental concerns, and then, in claiming that it is peasant production that does the damage, he sets the terms for a redefinition of the 'problem':

They have stigmatized us, as if we are endangering the environment. I don't think so ... We flower growers, for economical reasons ... use pesticides in a very rational way and I don't want to blame anybody, but if you go and do research on how peasants who grow onions and potatoes use pesticides, they abuse pesticides and in

what ways, it's amazing! They think that the greater quantity you apply the better! Besides, we flower growers are able to pay for ... the most advanced pesticides, very low toxicity or no toxicity at all, they are very expensive. The prices I have to pay! While a potato grower? They continue using the same products as always.

William defends employers by making cultural claims that distinguish 'us', cut-flower owners and managers, from 'them', peasant workers. The former are constructed as modern industrial producers who know how to make rational use of the latest inputs, the latter as traditional pre-industrial peasants who are ignorant about pesticides. In Fraser's terms, William metes out to peasant producers cultural injustice or misrecognition: he subjects them to alien standards of judgement and disparagement. In so doing he lays his own claim to have been misrecognized by workers and campaigners, who fail to valorize his contribution to the industry and national economy.

William goes on to claim that capitalism can redeem peasant producers; employment in the cut-flower industry can both civilize and modernize them:

[Workers] have a mentality that is not used to performing industrial tasks. In flowers ... you need to operate under standards and routines that the peasants are not ready for ... The Colombian peasants are used to improvising, they do what comes! They do what they have to do for today and then to change this mentality of improvisation to the planned things, to the normalized processes is not easy! It isn't easy! You have to fight against this culture; you have to transform them into rural operatives.

Here the misrecognition continues as workers are negatively stereotyped as former peasant producers who are undisciplined and haphazard, in contrast to the reliable and disciplined employers. It falls thereby to the employers to transform worker 'mentality' in order to achieve efficient production. Thus the 'problem' in cut-flowers is redefined from capitalist exploitation, as the campaigners might present it, to not (yet) enough capitalist penetration to fully modernize workers. The civilizing mission claimed by employers resonates with the modernization paradigm: 'Modernization implies the "total" transformation of pre-modern societies: their institutions, their cultures and the behaviours they promote ... [modernization theorists] attributed the "backwardness" of the Third World to the absence of the values associated with rational individualism ... ' (Kabeer, 1994: 16). The difference here is that the 'backward' and the 'modern' are seen to be co-existing within one country, it becoming the duty of the elite, white, male, Colombian capitalist to 'civilize' the working-class, mixed-race, female, Colombian flower worker.

Modernization theory explains poverty and disadvantage in terms of intrinsic inadequacies, rather than, say, the unevenness of global capitalism. Although William does not refer specifically to wages, implicit in his discourse is the idea that low wages for cut-flower workers reflect their intrinsically lesser worth, their lack of skill and need for training. Of course wage levels in the sector are also a product of political economy, including competitive pressures on employers to lower costs; the relative surplus of labour; and the repression of collective bargaining. As Fraser has argued, the labour market is 'not directly

regulated by patterns of cultural value' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 58). However, it does 'instrumentalize' such patterns (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 58), and William's undervaluation of labour's contribution serves as a discursive legitimation of low wages with real effects. According to Skeggs (in a UK context): 'Most representations of working-class people contribute to devaluing and delegitimizing their already meagre capitals, putting further blocks on tradeability, denying any conversion into symbolic capital. When conversion is blocked positions of inequality are maintained' (1998: 11). In the Colombian case it is not only class inequality that is maintained but also that of gender and 'race', since the workers are both female and mestiza.

We might push further this imbrication of the cultural and the material. First, while working practices and conditions in cut flowers reflect structural trends such as intensification, flexibilization and cost-cutting, they also reflect the employers' failure to grant parity of esteem to workers, a failure to grant them what Hodson calls 'inherent dignity' (2001: 4). If workers are not seen as equal then it is easier to appropriate their leisure time, foster working conditions that use up their body capital unsustainably, and deny them access to facilities employers assume entitlement to. Second, while the lack of collective bargaining reflects repressive state policies, it also reflects a failure to grant workers social standing, to conceive of them as equal partners at the negotiating table. There are resonances here with Hughes' study of the Kenyan cut-flower industry, which notes the conceptualization by employers of workers as passive and their exclusion from decision making (Hughes, 2001: 398).

William's 'othering' of workers is particularly salient because it speaks to dominant discourses in Colombia about a 'backward' peasantry. It is reproduced in this Janus-headed account from Jacinto,<sup>11</sup> a cut-flower supervisor: 'We [supervisors] have to control ... to see that things are done ... because we [Colombians] are used to being told to do things otherwise we wouldn't do anything.' Here Jacinto buys into the assumption that workers, him included, are inherently lazy and require discipline. However, William's cultural injustice may also be refused by workers through alternative accounts of the labour process, showing that they achieve their competence and productivity on the basis of agricultural skills and judgement that they bring with them, as well as by learning from one another (Madrid, 2003: 177–80). Their talk of improvisation and fending for themselves redefines in positive terms William's charges of traditionalism and irrationality, of making it up as they go along. Redolent perhaps of the *bricoleur* (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 17), workers' ability to 'do what comes' arguably makes for the flexible labour that the industry relies on. However, workers' capacity to achieve external validation for such a self-portrait is very limited.

### **Appropriating Claims of Economic Injustice: *Florverde***

Cut-flower campaigns have provoked discursive denials and redefinitions from employers, which might be understood as a refusal to debate injustice claims.

They have simultaneously provoked a third response, appropriation of the ground occupied by campaigners, which might be understood as an attempt to control the terms of the debate. If consumers have changed their demand preferences, to include the conditions of labour as well as the price, colour and longevity of cut flowers, then producers have to respond and be seen to be responding. Otherwise they are vulnerable to the flexibility that distributors and retailers have to buy elsewhere in a global market.

The appropriation strategy has been led by *Asocolflores*, acknowledging that 'people were increasingly sensitive to environmental and social considerations when buying a product' (Asocolflores, n.d.: 8). Initially cooperating with German importers over a proposed Colombian Clean Flowers Declaration, *Asocolflores* withdrew before it got off the ground (Brassel and Rangel, 2001: 35). A programme in the Dutch flower industry, centred on environmental issues, proved more attractive:

One of the most interesting examples was found in Holland ... [the Floriculture Environment Project]. The concept was simple: caring for the environment is essentially a matter of keeping records. If you record your consumption figures you will reduce the burden on the environment. For the Colombian flower sector this program had many advantages ... a flexible program, changing with changing needs and conditions ... a competitive element, with certain nurseries showing the way through better cultivation methods ... a self-managed system where flower growers themselves had to take the initiative to participate and improve their working habits to suit the new environmental conditions ... the fact that it was based on statistics made the program free of any subjective evaluations. (Asocolflores, n.d.: 8)

Key elements of the type of scheme imagined by *Asocolflores* emerge here: careful record-keeping; management from within; a voluntary approach; flexibility; 'objective' statistics (presumably with which to counter future campaigns); and an emphasis on environmental issues rather than labour rights. Nonetheless, it was also acknowledged that 'the program the Colombians were looking for had to *include the human factor*' (Asocolflores, n.d.: 8, original emphasis).

This is the context in which *Florverde* (Green Flower) was initiated in 1996, described by *Asocolflores* as: 'An integrated strategy to optimize the use of resources, with a long term view to improve profitability of the Colombian flower growers, within the concept of sustainable development' (Asocolflores, n.d.: 8). It might also be described as a campaign to make producers look good to the outside world, including Western consumers of cut flowers. Motivated by profit maximization, *Florverde's* very title privileges environmental not labour issues. Moreover, *Asocolflores* assumes the right to conceive the programme unilaterally; there is to be no dialogue with workers or their advocates to identify injustices and their remedies. Having constructed employees as unreliable and irrational, and campaigners as ignorant and conspiratorial, it becomes 'obvious' that they are excluded.

Given its conceptualization, it is unsurprising that *Florverde's* code of conduct (Asocolflores, 2002) falls short of the labour standards enshrined in the ICC (Brassel and Rangel, 2001: 63–5). The most significant deficit is the right

to freedom of association and collective bargaining, central to the ICC and considered by the International Labour Organization to be 'fundamental to the rights of human beings at work' and 'a precondition for ... the improvement of individual and collective conditions of work' (ILO, 2000). In this respect *Florverde* offers less than Articles 55 and 56 of the Colombian Constitution (Government of Colombia, 1991) and is at odds with three ILO Conventions ratified by Colombia (ILO, 2005). Thereafter comparison shows that the principles of the *Florverde* code provide less comprehensive labour standards. For example, the only stipulation about wages is that they be paid promptly, security of employment is unaddressed and for working hours *Florverde* falls back on national employment law, typical of corporate codes but often insufficient to protect workers.<sup>12</sup> Highly toxic (category 1) pesticides are not banned and while a 'commitment' not to hire workers under 18 years is offered, forced labour is not mentioned.

Moreover, while the ICC requires independent implementation and verification, with 'provisions for workers, trade unions and other concerned groups to lodge complaints about violations of the Code' (Brassel and Rangel, 2001: 65), *Florverde* relies on scrutiny from within:

An important aspect of *Florverde* ... is that it does not require certification by third parties ... how, one might ask, does the program guarantee the validity of its results? All items on the checklists are objective, and most are quantitative, so they are easily verifiable if in doubt ... benchmarking ... acts as a promoter of competitive spirit within the group ... [and] *Florverde* experts are there, not only to train farms on social and environmental techniques, but also to verify the validity of reported data. (Asocolflores, n.d.: 13)

The vested interests of employers and exclusion of worker input make it difficult to trust this system of self-certification, and indeed it is now widely accepted that codes of conduct require independent scrutiny of their implementation (Zadek, 1998).

Interviews with workers and labour activists contribute to this critique of *Florverde*. While the initiative is visible on the ground, employees associate it with new uniforms and cleanliness rather than with delivering economic justice:

people who work in the companies have the *Florverde* brand on their uniforms and they have posters in the companies about it but one knows through the workers who work there that the conditions remain the same or even worse than the companies that are not in *Florverde* (Magnolia).<sup>13</sup>

The workers know that it is a label that the company imposed, they know that it is something to improve the company because they say 'You know since they have this label ... they have changed the carpets in the offices, they have introduced new telephone networks ... they have increased the sprays and also we keep the company very clean and tidy, they order us to go and collect the rubbish, to clean, all the time we have cleaning campaigns ...' (Amaranta).<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the *Florverde* code is arguably better than nothing, offering a leverage point that can be capitalized on. Just as *Asocolflores* appropriated and

diluted the code sought by campaigners, so its home-grown code is subject to appropriation by workers and campaigners seeking to expose its deficits. Having been provoked by the campaigns to embark on a trajectory to consider labour conditions, the cut-flower sector may be taken further than it intended to go. Indeed the labour standards offered by the code have gradually improved since its inception and, according to the manager of *Florverde*, the code is currently being revised to harmonize with the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) Base Code<sup>15</sup> (Isaza, 2005), which includes freedom of association and collective bargaining (Ethical Trading Initiative, 2005). Moreover, independent certification of 43 of the farms participating in *Florverde* (28%) has been reported (Asocolflores, 2005b).

### **Displacing Claims of Economic Injustice: *Cultivemos la paz en familia***

As well as a voluntary code of conduct, *Asocolflores* has also developed a training programme for workers focused on conflict management. *Cultivemos la paz en familia*, or 'Let's cultivate peace in the family', is an initiative designed for 'backward' workers by a paternalistic management. This is how William explains the problems faced by women cut-flower workers:

In this macho society, especially at this cultural level, there is a lot of *machismo*. And it is very complicated. Personally, I have a lawyer who gives advice to the company in all of these issues of abusive partners, but it is very difficult to change their habits ... I see that it is worse among old people. For young women things are a bit more equal, it has been changing bit by bit. Because that [the job] gives more independence to women, before when the woman used to depend on her husband, he could abuse her and she had to put up with it. Not any more, now the woman works and she can tell him, 'I'll leave you because I can live alone and can look after myself.' But with this *machismo*, then the man intimidates the woman with violence and forces her to continue working for him, to stay with him. Then, we need to hire a lawyer, make the legal arrangements and see how they separate, and all these things. However, the cultural legacy is very strong, but not all are the same, not all men abuse women ... But in the majority of the relationships there is abuse.

William's analysis bears some scrutiny. Domestic violence is a serious problem in Colombia as elsewhere; employment in cut flowers may give women workers the economic leverage to improve their conjugal contract (Friedemann-Sanchez, 2006); by no means all men are abusive. More problematic is that William singles out a *machismo* specific to, and an inherent cultural deficit in, most working-class men. Pilar,<sup>16</sup> an *Asocolflores* employee, shares his pathologization of the working classes, explaining couples' problems as an outcome of innate male alcoholism and indiscipline. Meanwhile William's own self-image is, by contrast, of a civilized and concerned person who deploys the law to rescue women workers. Capitalist relations are thereby construed as a panacea, offering women legal redress in the short term and the full benefits of modernity in the long term.

Such displaced diagnoses of workers' problems, coupled with employer concerns to transform workers' culture and make good their 'deficits', help to make sense of the *Cultivemos* programme launched in 1999. Misrecognition (intentionally or not) legitimates an intervention that is conceived without workers' input and pays no attention to maldistribution. The programme is initially described as 'for the flower workers who seek to facilitate conflict management within the family and the work place' (Asocolflores, 2001: 3). The inclusion of workplace conflict is promising but it makes no further appearance. Implementation is based on a series of workshops in which groups of workers 'learn' about conflict and various solutions to it. They are then asked to transmit this 'knowledge' to their families and reconvene a month later to share experiences. In 2001, 92 companies were participating, over 40 workshops had been held and 277 facilitators trained (Asocolflores, 2001: 3). By 2004 130 companies were involved and 21,000 workers, their families and communities, were reported to have benefited (Asocolflores, 2005b).

The discourse and practice of conflict resolution has wider salience in Colombia, used in a variety of scenarios ranging from trade union disputes and local government discussions to peace process negotiations. Conflict management training is widespread and assumes that all conflicts, whether domestic disputes, labour disputes or wars, can be solved through the right approach. For *Asocolflores* the conflict is assumed to be gendered and lie in the home, and the onus in solving it lies squarely with the workers: 'opportunities for reflection and communication are created that offer personal growth and development tools for improving one's own quality of life, as well as the ability for living together' (Asocolflores, 2005b). The *Cultivemos* programme serves to displace the possibility of conflict between capital and labour – the problems of women workers are deemed to lie in the culture of the household rather than the economics of their labour market position.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, the programme is used to further aggrandize cut-flower employers and their contribution to nation-building: 'The programme was born out of the interest of the flower growers to make a contribution to the country's peace' (Monchaux de Velez, 2000: 1). In 2004 USAID, the development 'arm' of the US government, validated the programme through a grant of US\$900,000 (Asocolflores, 2005b). Rather than a contribution to Colombia's development, however, we suggest that *Cultivemos* is better understood as a public relations tool furthering the interests of cut-flower employers. Premised on cultural domination and stereotyping of cut-flower workers and their families, it serves, *inter alia*, to negate employer complicity in maldistribution.

## Conclusion

Fair trade campaigns are an interesting and relatively new example of claims for redistribution in an age when, according to Fraser, claims for recognition are in the ascendancy (1995: 68). In analysing the contestation of fair trade in the

Colombian cut-flower industry, we have sought to consider how symbolic processes are entwined with relations of social power, how cultural injustice relates to economic injustice. Having looked at the particularities of the sector within Colombian society, and positioned it in a global, neo-liberal context, we detailed the charges of maldistribution laid before cut-flower companies. The charges are made on behalf of workers and, ultimately, by consumers, who are mobilized to demand fairness in flowers. While Colombian employers enjoy power locally, their interests shored up by state repression of labour, they are trading in a global economy and are vulnerable to loss of market share given the 'brand' damage consumer campaigns can do. Four responses to the campaigns were identified, as employers seek to manoeuvre between the call to improve labour standards and the need to keep production costs down.

In the first place, employers have tried a counter-discourse of denial that renders campaigners irresponsible and malicious, drawing on self-positioning as crucial to a new, 'improved' Colombian nation to constitute themselves as the 'real' victims of unjustified slander. If there is no charge to answer then redistribution can be resisted. However, such denials are vulnerable to repeated and widely disseminated 'evidence' of poor labour standards. Second, employer misrecognition of their mainly female employees, as backward, inefficient and irrational, serves to redefine peasant producers as the source of environmental damage and redefine work on the *cultivos* as a valuable opportunity for employee modernization. Here cultural injustice establishes a rationale for low wages and social control, again enabling redistribution to be resisted. However, it is also subject to a counter-discourse reaffirming workers' skills and inventiveness.

A third response has been to appropriate selective demands of the campaigns through the *Florverde* initiative, privileging opportunities to rationalize the production process while glossing over wages and working conditions and discounting the need for labour representation. This may yet prove a hostage to fortune, however, providing campaigners with a platform from which to demand more. A sub-programme of *Florverde*, *Cultivemos la paz en familia*, provides the fourth response, premised on further misrecognition of working-class men as inherently 'violent' and 'exploitative' towards women and displacing the problems for women workers from the economic realm to the cultural. It is an example of 'a gender-coded politics of recognition' (Fraser, 2005b: 301) that has the potential to be used to distract attention from a 'regressive politics of redistribution' (Fraser, 2005b: 302).

Discursive interventions matter to employers, for they are essential to them economically as they seek to offset and discredit claims of maldistribution. They also matter to workers and campaigners; ethical trade itself is premised on a discourse to persuade consumers to demand production processes guaranteeing minimum labour standards. Moreover, it is through counter-discourses that workers seek to preserve their subjectivity and self-worth in the face of undignified working conditions. The cut-flower campaigns have only had limited-success to date in transforming economic conditions for Colombian workers, but they have certainly put employers and *Asocolflores* under pressure and

provoked them to action. Moreover, as cut-flower farms in East Africa gain comparative advantage from more credible guarantees of labour standards,<sup>18</sup> and as the likelihood of US consumers being mobilized grows (ILRF, 2003a; VIDEA, 2001) further concessions may follow. For now it remains to be seen if, in the end, campaigns which are affirmative of workers' position can engender more radical transformations, and whether in targeting outcomes for workers such campaigns can ultimately address the root causes of maldistribution.

Using Fraser's conceptual apparatus has highlighted the importance of meaning-making in the labour process for cut flowers, including the extent to which maldistribution is legitimated via misrecognition (deliberately or otherwise) and misrecognition is shored up by maldistribution. Moreover, it confirms the need to combat economic injustice through the promotion of cultural justice; even where codes of conduct offer full labour rights they are unlikely to be realized if employers disparage and 'other' employees. Finally, it has made clear that the pursuit of labour justice is a fundamentally political struggle. As such struggles continue for Colombian cut-flower workers it is crucial that they have greater voice, not only in determining labour conditions but also in the ethical trade campaigns themselves. As Fraser has insisted, dialogics must be central to processes of identifying and remedying injustice (1997: 82).

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## Notes

- 1 Fieldwork was undertaken over 10 months by Gilma Madrid. Negotiating access to participants was difficult given Colombia's political climate: workers were approached via NGOs, worker organizations and church groups; plantation owners and *Asocolflores* staff via personal introductions and formal vetting by *Asocolflores*. Interviews were taped and transcribed if permitted, otherwise written notes were taken. Pseudonyms have been used for all interviewees quoted. For full details of the methodology see Madrid (2003).
- 2 Not all *mestizos* are equal in Colombia; lighter skin is perceived to be a form of cultural capital and facilitates social mobility (Navarro and Sanchez, 1999).
- 3 Fraser's concept of misrecognition may be reminiscent of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence – the (legitimated) refusal by the dominant to grant the dominated equal standing (2000). However, while for Fraser the misrecognition is of the qualities of the dominated by the dominant, and the dominated may well refuse such a characterization, for Bourdieu the misrecognition is by the dominated, who do not perceive the practices of power by the dominant and are thus complicit in what (translation of) Foucault deems 'the order of things' (1970).
- 4 Tenenbaum's description (2002: 1).

- 5 Rosa is a 45-year-old mestiza rural-urban migrant who has worked in the cut-flower industry since the 1970s. Educated to secondary level she is married with three children and has been a trade unionist for over 20 years.
- 6 Antonia, a white middle-class woman in her 50s, migrated to Colombia upon marriage. Educated to post-graduate level she manages a cut-flower company owned with her husband's family on land they have owned for generations.
- 7 In her early 30s, Fabiola is a white lawyer from Bogotá who has worked for *Asocolflores* for about three years.
- 8 Under the Andean Trade Preference Act Colombian cut flowers have duty-free access to the US market, in return for, inter alia, a commitment to combat illicit drug production and trafficking.
- 9 In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 1990.
- 10 William, who migrated to Bogotá to pursue his studies, is white, has an economics degree and is in his 50s. After his fruit-farming business venture failed, he raised capital to start a cut-flower farm on land he originally rented but is now buying.
- 11 Jacinto is a 37-year-old mestizo who originally trained as a vet and has been a supervisor for over 10 years. He is a migrant from Antioquia, has three children and is in his second marriage.
- 12 In 2002 the labour laws in Colombia were reformed to increase the official working day and reduce the premium for work on Sundays and public holidays, leaving women workers an average of US\$21–25 worse off per month (Oxfam, 2005).
- 13 Magnolia is a 40-year-old mestiza with university education who has worked with labour organizers in the cut-flower sector for over 15 years.
- 14 Amaranta migrated to Bogotá in 1985 from a rural area of Tolima, where she was sharecropping with her family, growing maize and beans. Educated to primary school level and of mestiza origin, she began working in the cut-flower sector in the late 1980s.
- 15 The ETI is a coalition of companies, NGOs and trade unions seeking to improve labour standards through the promotion and implementation of corporate codes of conduct. The ETI Base Code comprises nine clauses on minimum labour standards for corporate codes, which ETI corporate members commit to implement.
- 16 Pilar was born in Bogotá and has worked for *Asocolflores* for many years, specializing in the social welfare of cut-flower workers. University educated, she is in her 50s and mestiza.
- 17 This is not to detract from potential benefits for women workers, who may be empowered to separate from violent husbands.
- 18 In 2004, Tesco launched 'own brand' fairtrade roses from Kenya, in conjunction with the Fairtrade Foundation.

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