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Aurélie Carimentrand, Jérôme Ballet

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Fair trade twin towns Pondicherry and Auroville: a fresh look at activism

Aurélie Carimentrand
CIRAD Montpellier (France)
aureliecarimentrand@yahoo.fr
+33676065462

Jérôme Ballet
GRETHA UMR CNRS 5113 University of Bordeaux (France)
jballetfr@yahoo.fr
+33556848671

First conceived has a relationship between consumers in the North and producers in the South, the Fair trade movement has known significant changes since the early 2000s. The first has been the redefinition of fair trade to North / North or South / South relationships. Short circuits of production-consumption in the North are now assimilated to fair trade (Le Velly, 2011). Researches in the South are almost non-existent, although many approaches for defining national labels or national brands have been undertaken. For example, the Fair Trade India brand for shops was launched in 2010 with the explicit aim of targeting local consumption. The second was the extension of the approach to collective consumption entities. From this point of view, the international campaign "Fair Trade Towns" was launched in 2000. Initiated by Oxfam in the rural commune of Garstang, UK, and supported by the Fairtrade Foundation in UK, it consists of developing fair products purchases in the structures and institutions of cities, whether public (School canteens ...) or private (cafés, restaurants ...). It is then a way to accredit places where local consumption of fair products and awareness-raising activities are undertaken with the aim to endorse local authorities (Malpass et al., 2007). It participates to a broader movement where places, not only towns but also schools, universities, counties, nations, provide to consumers more organized means for fair trade participation (Smith, 2015). This is then a new step in the Fair trade market development (Alexander and Nicholls, 2006) built upon an innovative marketing network (Nicholls and Opal, 2005) mainly based on a grassroots campaign (Lyon et al., 2014) and allowing participants to move away from the neo-liberal model of individual action (Low and Davenport, 2007). It is currently being implemented in 30 countries where cities are taking specific steps. Five criteria must be met in order to obtain the fair trade town certificate: i) the local council passes a resolution supporting Fair trade and should buy fair trade products for

its meetings, offices, canteens, etc.; ii) Fair trade products must be available in town's shops, served in local cafés, restaurants, and catering establishments, according to a volume in relation to the population; iii) Fair trade products are used by a number of local work places and community organizations (faith groups, schools etc).; iv) The campaign must attract media coverage and popular support, communication and awareness-raising actions on Fair trade must be developed; v) a local steering group must be created to ensure the continued commitment its Fair trade status. These five criteria are adaptable in particular for developing and emerging countries (Makulski et al., 2015).

Researches on northern towns are embryonic (Peattie and Samuel, 2016; Rolland, 2015). In the South, they are non-existent. It is true that cities in the South are much less likely to have initiated this approach. Of the 1,878 certified cities, only 8 are in the South: the towns of Rio de Janeiro (certified in 2016) and Poços de caldas (certified in 2012) in Brazil; Riobamaba (2016) and Quito (2016) in Equador; Pérez Zeledón (2009) in Costa Rica; Ebolowa (2015) in Cameroon; New Kofondua (2011) and Bolgatanga (2016) in Ghana.

Our paper precisely explores the case of a Fair trade town in the South. As Peattie and Samuel (2016) underline, the lack of deep empirical contextual understanding is an essential challenge to overcome for a better understanding of the phenomenon. From this point of view, our paper presents several original features. First, it is, as far as we know, the first paper on a Fair trade town in the South. Second, we have chosen to study the towns of Pondicherry and Auroville in India, and it is the first towns engaged in the certification process in India. Third, Pondicherry and Auroville decided to join their efforts to be Fair trade twin towns, going beyond the usual contours of certified towns. As Arond (2006) emphasizes, several Fair trade twin towns experiments have already been done. They usually concern a Fair trade town in the North, already certified, that help a town in the South that wants to be certified. In the Pondicherry and Auroville case, they are two towns in the south engaged simultaneously in the certification process. A new kind of dynamics can then be analyzed. Fourth, and we discuss this point in length, the Fair trade twin towns initiative Pondicherry and Auroville takes a fresh look at activism. As underlined by Hira and Ferrie (2006), the Fair trade markets are largely driven by activism. O'Shaughnessy and Kennedy (2010) distinguish between traditional activism linked to consumers and citizen protests and public action campaigns on one hand, and relational activism rooted in like-minded people network concerned by an issue, especially in digital interconnected world, on the other hand. Our case study shows that beyond consumers, citizen, and NGOs, companies may be an important part of a new form of activism.

Methodology and data collection

One of the main stakes in Fair trade town analysis is to collect empirical material through a contextual understanding. Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), Samuel and Peattie (2015), and Peattie and Samuel (2016) have shown that grounded theory constitutes an appealing methodology for collecting data on Fair trade. Grounded theory highlights that stakeholders' viewpoint on the social world, and in our case on Fair trade initiatives, allows us a comprehensive analysis of the construction and dynamics of social movements, the Fair trade towns initiatives in our case. Grounded theory is then mainly based on a research design in which qualitative data should be capture through views, motives, and everyday actions of insiders (Blaikie, 2000). Following this methodology, we have done semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders of the Fair trade town initiative. During each interview we tried to capture the viewpoint on the Fair trade town initiative of the person interviewed, its role within this initiative, and the levers and brakes that s/he feels could block or enhance the initiative. We ranked the interviewed in four categories: member of the national steering committee, member of the local steering committee, Fair trade members of the initiative as identified by the main stakeholders of the initiative themselves, and others. All interviews were recorded. Beyond interviews, we have interacted during six months with the main stakeholders (February-July 2017), observing their actions and positioning within the initiative. But furthermore, we asked the main stakeholders to help us in contacting other stakeholders, favoring interactions and the understanding of the viewpoint of the most active of them. We also regularly share our findings with some stakeholders during the research, allowing us to enter in an interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1989). To favor interactions we participate also in events such as the fair trade walk in Pondicherry, April 29th, and we have organized few events on fair trade such as a "fair trade tea" at the cafeteria of the French Institute of Pondicherry and a conference on fair trade at the Alliance Française in Pondicherry.

Discussion of findings

In this paper we present three types of findings around this initiative. Findings concern first the originality of the kind of activism involved in this initiative. An original feature of this case is that it is led by business organizations and not consumers or more traditional activists. It then shed light on a new kind of activism, corporate activism; a kind of activism that could be essential for Fair trade movements in the South.

Second, we deal with social capital and the issues surrounding social capital due to the form of activism. Social capital and social networks are important assets for the promotion of Fair Trade. Fair trade initiatives are usually built around an activists network (Davies, 2009; Davies and Ryals, 2010). Due to the feature we just discussed, the initiative was built

around business leaders network. This is reflected in the local steering committee, but also in the national steering committee and the dynamics of the initiative. The main stakeholders of the initiative have some difficulties to reach local consumers, apart tourists. For instance the very concept of Fair trade is not understood by most of Tamil people. They assimilate Fair trade to other initiatives but do not understand the Fair trade concept. The translation of the concept in Tamil is of course an issue here, but beyond the very meaning of the concept constitutes a major stake. As a matter of fact, local consumers are not aware about Fair trade. Most of them know products from Auroville or from the Ashram in Pondicherry but cannot identify Fair trade products. To sum up, whereas the feature of the initiative, led by business activists, favors the starting of the initiative, the social capital of the founders also weakens its dynamics. Third, we enlarge our analysis, tackling the issue of the territorial dynamics of the initiative linked to the specificities of both towns. The idea of twin towns is considered 'natural' for several stakeholders, due to their spiritual imprint. The links between Auroville and Pondicherry are obvious from an historical perspective, even if the creation of Auroville was the subject of open conflicts between the Auroville pioneers and the Ashram of Pondicherry, which led to legal proceedings (Hemsell, 1977, Thomas and Thomas, 2013). Furthermore Auroville was mainly developed thanks to local people workforce coming from nearby villages belonging to the Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu territories and they continue to be a main workforce for Auroville production units (Thomas and Thomas, 2013). On the other direction Auroville's products are largely present in Pondicherry shops and several Auroville units have got their own shops in Pondicherry. Nevertheless, the dynamics is marked by several original features. In our case study, Pondicherry and Auroville are territories with a fragmented geography and could be considered as Fair trade tourism towns, linking the Fair trade town movement to the Fair trade tourism movement (see Cleverdon and Kalisch, 2000, on Fair trade tourism).

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