

'It's up to the market to decide': Revealing and concealing power in the sustainable tea supply chain

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journals.sagepub.com/home/coa**Matthew Archer** 

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Abstract

In 2007, Unilever, the world's largest tea company, announced plans to source its entire tea supply sustainably, beginning with the certification of its tea producers in East Africa to Rainforest Alliance standards. As a major buyer of Kenyan tea, Unilever's decision pushed tea producers across Kenya to subscribe to Rainforest Alliance's sustainable agriculture standard in order to maintain access to the global tea market; according to a 2018 report, over 85% of Kenya's tea producers were Rainforest Alliance certified. Drawing on ethnographic material among supply chain actors across different sites along the sustainable tea value chain (from those designing and disseminating standards to tea traders to smallholder tea farmers), this article examines how these actors frequently attributed the power to determine the outcomes of certification to a faceless 'market'. Deferring to 'the market', we observe, served primarily to mask the outsized power of lead firms (in particular Unilever) to determine conditions of tea production and trade. At the same time, 'the market' was also in some cases qualified by our interlocutors, allowing them implicitly (and at times explicitly) to reveal power and give it a face. Concealing and revealing power in this way, we suggest, can be seen as

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a mode of engagement among supply chain actors operating in 'sustainable' supply chains, like the Rainforest Alliance-certified Kenyan tea supply chain, in which the power of lead firms tends to be consolidated through market-driven sustainability initiatives. Such a mode of engagement mitigates exclusion from sustainable supply chains while maintaining space for critique.

Keywords

Certification, Kenya, market-driven sustainability, power, standards, supply chain, tea

According to a May 2007 press release from the Rainforest Alliance: 'Unilever, the world's largest tea company, has announced plans to source its entire tea supply sustainably, starting with the certification of its tea producers in East Africa, to Rainforest Alliance standards.' Starting with Unilever's own estate in Kericho, Kenya, the plan was to deliver the first certified tea to European restaurants and catering companies by August 2007, which would 'be quickly followed by Lipton, the world's best-selling tea brand, and PG Tips, the UK's No.1 tea.' After that, Unilever 'aim[ed] to have all Lipton Yellow Label and PG Tips tea bags sold in Western Europe certified by 2010 and all Lipton tea sold globally to come from sustainable sources by 2015'. The goal of this ambitious certification drive, according to the press release, was 'to enable growers to obtain higher prices for their tea, raising their incomes and enabling them to achieve a better quality of life and standard of living on a sustainable basis'.

During an interview almost 15 years later, a former Rainforest Alliance executive described the events leading up to Unilever deciding to pursue Rainforest Alliance certification. At the time, Unilever had decided to focus on its brand as a company – that is, as Unilever – rather than focusing exclusively on the brands it owned, such as Lipton tea and Hellman's mayonnaise. They hosted a meeting where they invited leaders from different sustainability organizations to present their various approaches to sustainability:

In that meeting, we had a good discussion about what we were doing and the positive impacts for farmers both environmentally and socially, and also from a profitability perspective, because one of the really interesting things with the Sustainable Agriculture Standard with Rainforest Alliance is that you actually see productivity and quality go up. So you have an ongoing ability to access higher prices rather than just having to apply for a Fairtrade quota, which is what I found interesting in the work they [Rainforest Alliance] were doing from the social and economic perspective. So Unilever of course was interested in that, as well.

For this interlocutor, what made Rainforest Alliance's certification scheme attractive to Unilever was the fact that it relied on market dynamics to generate impacts

rather than a top-down, quasi-philanthropic approach. In contrast with Fairtrade International, which requires buyers to pay a price premium to producer organizations, Rainforest Alliance's theory of change assumes that improvements in crop quality and productivity will generate higher wages for farmers who can charge higher prices for higher quality tea and who can produce more tea to sell on international markets using the same amount of labour and other inputs. What distinguished the Rainforest Alliance from other certification schemes, in particular the crop-specific certifications developed by Fairtrade International, was the way it '[uses] markets to effect changes at scale. [...] Back when Rainforest Alliance was started thirty years ago, that was a brand new concept.'

The idea that markets can be used to effect change is central to the Rainforest Alliance's mission. According to its website: 'The Rainforest Alliance is creating a more sustainable world by using social and market forces to protect nature and improve the lives of farmers and forest communities' (RA, n.d.). Although this kind of market-driven sustainability might have been innovative thirty years ago, the privatization of social and environmental governance is now well documented (Cashore, 2002; Grabs, 2020). Scholars across disciplines have paid particular attention to the role of certification schemes as a key technology of neoliberal governance (Guthman, 2007), showing how these schemes tend to shift power toward already powerful 'lead firms' within global value chains (Ponte, 2019).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork across different sites along the global supply chain of Kenyan certified tea,¹ this article examines a tendency among supply chain actors across these sites to invoke 'the market' as a powerful actor which determines the outcomes of certification schemes like those designed and disseminated by the Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade International, and other standards development organizations. The ways in which our interlocutors both appeal and defer to 'the market' eclipses not only power relations that are otherwise rather apparent, but also the ways in which those power relations change as a result of the growing popularity of market-based certification schemes. The claim that Rainforest Alliance 'uses markets to effect change' is a good example of how tangible relationships between farm workers, estate managers, traders, and standards developers are often reduced to an invocation of abstract market dynamics. Put differently, by claiming to rely on or 'use' markets to achieve sustainability goals, the Rainforest Alliance obscures the unequal power relations between major buyers like Unilever and smallholder farmers who produce around 60% of Kenya's tea, as well as the relationships between other actors like brokers, traders, and standards developers themselves.

At the same time, we show how our interlocutors' references to 'the market' are often ambiguous and ambivalent, reinforcing the popular Foucauldian understanding of power as faceless and dispersed while also illuminating cracks in this façade where the face of (corporate) power peeks through. Specifically, we find that actors across our field sites – from Dutch tea traders to Kenyan tea farmers – often revert to a discussion of 'the market' as a way to tone down or neutralize their own critical understanding of the outsized power of particular actors, namely

big buyers and specifically Unilever. While this regular deferral to ‘the market’ obscures the power of lead firms and helps diminish their responsibility for producer livelihoods and environmental quality, it also provides cover for actors along the supply chain to voice their critical understandings of these firms’ power and, potentially, to challenge it.

Supply chains, sustainability, and power

It is perhaps unsurprising that the Rainforest Alliance, with its ostensibly novel emphasis on market-driven sustainability, was founded in 1987 at the height of neoliberal reform efforts. Although neoliberalism promises to empower individual workers and producers, and to scale back the influence of the state in people’s daily lives, anthropologists have shown how the opposite tends to occur: workers and producers are disempowered by corporations and other private organizations that are able to take advantage of lax social and environmental regulations, while the state’s power is not necessarily diminished, but restructured by new opportunities to administer international trade and new pressures to produce educated and productive workforces for multinational corporations and their investors (Ganti, 2014). Drawing on Foucauldian notions of governmentality and subjectification, anthropologists have shown how the paradoxical ‘techniques of governance’ that characterize neoliberalism :

[work] by deflecting attention from the system itself onto the individual. [They put] the spotlight on the proactive, ‘self-managed’ worker, the accountable, ‘calculative self’ and the ‘responsibilised citizen’. The political technologies that are designed to produce these subjects remain in the shadows, their operations proving hard to discern. Revealing the mechanisms by which power operates remains a key objective both for anthropologists and critical policy analysts. (Shore and Wright, 2011: 16)

The expansion of the Rainforest Alliance’s remit in global agricultural supply chains represents an important case study in the power of standards – as a principal technology of neoliberal governance (Gale et al., 2017; Guthman, 2007; Moberg, 2014) – to regiment the relationships between different actors, both human and non-human, across diverse spatial and temporal scales. Contemporary sustainability’s reliance on standards developed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and adopted by private actors like multinational corporations and farmer cooperatives is an example of what Cashore (2002) refers to as non-state market-driven environmental governance, in which the state’s role in environmental protection diminishes as other actors take responsibility for controlling who can access – and benefit from – various resources.

Between 2008 and 2016, the area of Rainforest Alliance-certified tea farms grew from 14,000 hectares to nearly 470,000 hectares globally, an astonishing increase of more than 3200% (ITC, 2018). These certifications are particularly important in Kenya, which is the world’s largest exporter of black tea by volume. (Although

China and India produce more tea, they also consume more domestically.) Unilever's 2007 commitment to sourcing exclusively from Rainforest Alliance-certified producers had a huge impact on the Kenyan tea industry. While Unilever produces tea on its own tea plantations in Kenya which are owned and managed by the subsidiary Unilever Tea Kenya, it also buys tea from a wide range of Kenyan producers, both through direct sales and through the Mombasa tea auction, where 75% of Kenya-produced tea is sold. The tea that is found in one of Unilever's popular Lipton or PG Tips tea bags is typically a blend of twenty to thirty different kinds of tea derived from multiple factories and associated smallholder farms and plantations across geographical regions and continents. These different teas, known as 'lots' in Kenya, are tasted and valued by brokers at tea auctions in the world's leading tea-producing countries (Calcutta in India, Colombo in Sri Lanka, Mombasa in Kenya) who then sell the lots on behalf of the factories producing them (on payment of commission of 0.75% of the tea sold) to buyers. At the Mombasa auction, the majority of buyers are agents for international tea companies. Buyers' purchasing decisions depend on the particular blends they seek to create, and take into account factors such as colour, taste and price. 'Lots' of tea are then mixed by expert tea tasters and blenders to create a standard taste across a single brand. Between different packs of Lipton tea bags, then, the teas that constitute the blend may be completely different and derived from different factories across different geographical regions, yet the taste is similar (see Besky, 2020). Unilever thus does not necessarily buy tea for its Lipton blends from its own plantations but from a range of factories in order to create a standardized product. Given Unilever's status as a major buyer of Kenyan teas, producers across the smallholder and plantation sector scrambled to become Rainforest Alliance certified in order to avoid being excluded from its purchasing remit. At the same time, a number of other major buyers such as Taylors of Harrogate, Twinings and Tata Global Beverages (specifically with regard to their popular Tetley's brand) followed Unilever's lead, announcing that they, too, would only purchase Rainforest Alliance-certified tea for their blends. Today, according to the International Trade Centre's (ITC's) 2018 *State of Sustainable Markets Report*, more than 85% of Kenya's tea farms are Rainforest Alliance certified. For Kenyan tea producers, Rainforest Alliance certification has become essential for their continued access to the global tea market.

The proliferation of sustainability standards changes the power dynamics that determine how and for whom value is generated, extracted, and accumulated along global supply chains. More specifically, as Ponte (2019) has shown, the adoption of market-oriented sustainability initiatives like voluntary certification schemes tends to enhance the power of multinational corporations (and their investors) vis-à-vis producers, especially smallholder producers. These schemes are a central component of what he describes as 'green capitalism', a political economic system in which 'lead firms use sustainability to appropriate surplus value from other [global value chain] actors' (Ponte, 2019: 212). Ponte conceptualizes power as the ability not only to appropriate this value but also to obscure the affordances

of that appropriation behind a veil of sustainability. He develops a typology of power derived from the combination of two variables – transmission of power (direct or diffuse) and arena of actors (dyadic or collective), resulting in four types of power: bargaining power, demonstrative power, institutional power, and constitutive power (see Dallas et al., 2019 for an elaboration). By applying this typology to the value chains of different commodities like coffee and biofuels, Ponte shows how various kinds of sustainability initiatives tend to enhance the power of multinational corporations.

In practice, the empowerment of these corporations has corresponded to the disempowerment of producers. There is a rich anthropological literature on organic, fair trade, and other sustainability certifications in global agricultural supply chains, drawing on ethnographic analyses of the production and exchange of commodities like coffee (West, 2012), rice (Galvin, 2018; Osterhoudt et al., 2020), and vanilla (Osterhoudt, 2012). Often connected explicitly to processes of neoliberalization and the subsequent resubjectification of peasants as producers (Aistara, 2018; Lapegna, 2016), this literature has shown how political and economic elites are able to use market-based sustainability initiatives to their own benefit. As Aistara (2018: 157–8) puts it, many of the programmes developed with the goal of helping farmers end up making their lives more complicated: ‘because they require a shift in the subjectivity of farmers from being owners, experts, or stewards to being recipients and consumers and ceding certain rights to experts’.

However, this literature has also documented the numerous ways in which people who are disempowered by market-based sustainability projects negotiate and contest their changing positions in global supply chains. Ethnographies of tea production have been an especially valuable source of theorizing the way power operates and is resisted in the context of global supply chains and their governance through standards. As Sen (2017: 125) argues, women plantation workers’ ‘involvement in gendered projects of value... demonstrates women’s efforts to navigate multiple structures of domination that coalesce together to make their voices fade to the background in a Fair Trade plantation extolling the virtues of women’s leadership’. Reflecting on Ortner’s (2005: 34, cited in Sen, 2017) understanding of the ‘condition of subjectification’ as itself ‘subjectively constructed and experienced’, Sen contends that plantation workers are ‘not just an effect of power but are subjects defined by a complex set of feelings, anxieties, and hope in a given historical moment’ (2017: 124–5). For Sen, women plantation workers have an acute awareness of ‘the systematic workings of structural power’ (2017: 191), even as they develop different strategies of negotiation and resistance. Sen’s commitment to understanding power through the actions and narratives of her interlocutors resonates with Besky’s (2014) project of understanding ‘how workers themselves understood their own powerlessness’, that is, ‘how workers theorized their own exploitation in response to [diverse strategies developed by fair trade projects, geographical indication programs, and separatist political movements] for reinventing the plantation’ (2014: 173).

These interventions reflect a tendency among anthropologists to ‘distinguish between *power* as widespread differential capacities to produce society by relations of domination, exploitation or subordination, and *politics* as forms of the actualization of power relations in particular space and time (and not only referring to the state)’ (Escalona Victoria, 2016: 249). Sen’s understanding of political agency as the ‘ability to understand and navigate power through specific action’ (2017: 183), for example, maintains this distinction. But this work also challenges conventional anthropological understandings of power as faceless, dispersed, and intangible, which are reinforced through anthropology’s traditional tendency to focus primarily on the way power is exercised from the perspective of people who are taken to be, in various ways, disempowered or otherwise marginalized. Or, as Gatt puts it: ‘Since in anthropology studies of power are normally carried out from subaltern positions, such power tends to be perceived as dispersed’ (2013: 363). From this perspective, the anti-political outcomes of sustainable development interventions, which typically involve the (further) empowerment of experts and other elites, comes to be seen as authorless and even unintended (see Archer, 2021; Ferguson, 1994).

Power does have a face, however, and while it is often dispersed, it also coalesces around particular people and organizations. As we show in the ethnographic sections that follow, actors along the Kenyan tea supply chain invoked the abstract notion of ‘the market’ to both mask and unmask that face. In the context of neoliberal sustainability schemes that rely on market dynamics as a force for positive impacts along global supply chains, how does ‘the market’ show up in different sites and among different actors, and with what effects? The rest of this article explores the ambivalent role of the market vis-à-vis our interlocutors’ political agency, arguing that its invocation not only obscures the increasingly unequal power relations that result from the widespread adoption of sustainability certification schemes, but also serves as a mode of engagement which circumvents exclusion from buyer-driven certification regimes while maintaining space for critique.

Siding with the market

After settling into a conference room during a spring 2019 visit to a Washington, DC-based standards development organization, Matthew asked Helena (the names of interlocutors are all pseudonyms) if she could elaborate a bit about a specific standard she had been working on, and what her role had been in its development and publication. Over the past few years, her organization had worked closely with Rainforest Alliance and other sustainability organizations to develop a ‘landscape approach’ to certification, which is an increasingly prominent way for these organizations to try and ‘scale up’ their impactfulness. She talked briefly about how her organization defines and measures impact, before moving on to a discussion of how the standard she had worked on was actually designed. After determining that there was a market for a new sustainability standard, the organization chose a number of ‘pilot projects’ that would represent a diverse range of ‘stakeholders’. Of

these pilot projects, a few would eventually become certified, but really the purpose was to find the weaknesses of the standard before it was officially published by testing it in the real world. Regarding the pilot projects, she said:

we were using them as our kind of learning pilot so that when they try to implement the standard, we ask them what was hard about it, where they needed more support with any aspect, and what we should change to address their type of project or the issues that their project was dealing with. So I think that we both got a lot out of that. I would say that we got more out of it than some of the pilots did.

At this point, she laughed before continuing: ‘I don’t say that and chuckle about it to be flippant. I just think that we ended up getting more out of it than the pilots.’

Helena’s frank admission that this process of stakeholder engagement and project piloting was more beneficial to her organization than to the ostensible beneficiaries of the standard was refreshing, since most people working in sustainable development insist that stakeholder engagement is done to benefit marginalized stakeholders like farmers and other workers in the Global South, obscuring the unequal power relations between different groups of stakeholders (Archer, 2020). It was even more refreshing given the insistence in much of the grey literature on sustainable development that ‘participation’ in these multi-stakeholder initiatives is a way to empower otherwise disempowered communities, which, following Helena’s reflections about the pilots, clearly was not always the case. Prompted to elaborate on the process of stakeholder engagement and the kinds of stakeholders her organization engages, Helena suggested that ‘independent, third-party auditors’ have quite a lot of power over local communities, since most certifications require a successful in-person audit. They can ask people questions and demand answers, not only from the managers of a farm but also, according to Helena, anyone on the street, since everyone involved in a project should know enough about it to answer the auditors’ questions.

But those auditors are empowered by the standard itself, since the standard is what dictates an in-person audit in the first place, which means the standard developer – i.e. Helena’s employer – indirectly empowers auditors. At the same time, auditors have an incentive to lobby for standards that have strict auditing requirements, since their jobs depend on auditing fees, which can be extremely, even prohibitively, expensive for producers. Those producers, in turn, have an incentive to lobby for audits that are both less stringent and less frequent, since the requirement to pay for audits eats into their already slim margins; if the cost of certification ultimately ends up being too high, they risk losing access to global markets, where big buyers are more likely to demand some kind of sustainability certification. In terms of being able to decide the fates of numerous groups of people, then – from auditors to producers – Helena’s organization seems like an exceedingly powerful actor.

From there, the conversation turned explicitly to power relations, and how these power relations affect the way Helena and her colleagues end up ‘balancing’ the

inherently competing interests between all the different stakeholders involved in the process of standards development. Here, she demurred:

Well I would say we are not a very powerful organization. Our CEO likes to say that we make rules that nobody likes but everybody can live with. [...] But we do make every effort to make our standard as simple as possible, and as cost effective as possible. So we aim for high return on investment for all the time that projects have to put in and other entities have to put in to actually completing the project documentation and going through the verification, that we aim to let them have a higher value for their project because of that. And I know that seems kind of stupid coming from someone who's been involved in these super-sophisticated and complex-seeming standards processes. But we really, really do try at every point to think about how we can simplify and make things easier for all of our stakeholders. And then I think, I really appreciate working for an organization that uses the market to achieve aims. You know, I know that we need . . . I appreciate advocacy organizations like that which push users to adopt [a specific certification, through, for example, protesting or other direct action]. That's great, you know, but I want to be on the market side and I think the market can really have a major role in driving incentives.

Helena denies the power of her organization vis-à-vis other actors by positioning the market itself as an actor with the ultimate power to drive incentives and help her organization achieve its aims. It is not that her organization is powerless per se, merely that her organization's power is both attenuated by and contingent upon the market. She distinguishes her market-led approach from the activist approach of those working in 'advocacy organizations,' indicating that, while she respects what they do ('That's great'), she prefers siding with the market. On one hand, this obscures the fact that Helena's organization is relatively powerful, but it also points to another relationship, namely the emergence of the market as a powerful actor that people working in sustainability consistently engage with in order to generate the kinds of impacts they hope to achieve through their work.

It's up to the market

Helena's attraction to 'working for an organization that uses the market to achieve its aims' and her belief that 'the market can really have a major role in driving incentives' hints at something some of Matthew's other interlocutors made much more explicit: a perception of 'the market' as an agent capable of doing various things, such as 'driving incentives' in the dialogue above, but also, as we discuss in this section, making decisions, making demands, and providing information about the different kinds of standards they produce.

In early 2020, Matthew visited a Dutch firm specializing in tea trading and importing, one of several tea traders in a country whose major port in Rotterdam indexes its long colonial and now postcolonial history of trading tropical products like tea, coffee, sugar, spices and rubber. During a long interview

with two traders, Pieter and Thijs, Matthew was able to ask a lot of questions about the relationship between sustainability, taste and value, as well as the role of trading firms in the promotion of sustainability. Although trading firms play an integral role in the global tea industry, they are rarely household names, in contrast with companies like Unilever, Nestlé and Tata Global Beverages that buy and sell their tea under popular brands like Lipton, Nestea and Tetley's. Their employer's position was that sustainability certifications like those associated with the Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade International were 'tools' to achieve sustainability rather than 'goals' that sustainability advocates should be content to achieve. They argued that other industry initiatives are needed in order to ensure the sustainability of the tea industry, which, in this case, meant the ability of the tea industry to keep existing in the face of increasing labour costs on one hand and decreasing tea prices on the other. When asked what one of these initiatives might look like, and what role tea traders might play in those initiatives, Thijs responded:

I think we have to have a supporting role but not a leading role in that. I mean, if we think it's very important that all the tea trade should be organic, I think we'll very soon have to close our shop. I think it's very good that we trade organic tea, and that we use as little pesticides as possible. But yeah I mean it's up to the industry to decide on that. And of course we can have a supporting and advising role. But I don't think it's up to us to have a leading role in the sense that we need to take an initiative like Unilever has, to say by 2020 95% of our tea is Rainforest Alliance certified. Yeah, I don't think that's up to us to do that. If our customer does not want tea that's Rainforest Alliance certified, then there's no point in doing that.

Pieter cut in to clarify: 'It also depends, of course, on the market. We are just [a small portion] of the global business here.' Customers buying from traders in Kenya or Malawi or Vietnam, he told me, want and expect different things when they buy tea. '[I]n Vietnam, for example, they even don't care if they use pesticides or not. So that's a whole different customer.'

Pieter's invocation of 'the market' obfuscates the power relations Thijs had described, specifically, in this case, the relationship between tea traders and their customers. According to Thijs, whether or not a particular certification is adopted depends on whether his biggest customers (in this case, multinational corporations that own popular tea brands) find those certifications valuable (e.g. whether tea drinkers are willing to pay more for certified versus non-certified tea, or whether requiring producers to comply with certification yields other forms of value, such as more information about production processes and so on). This is a relatively straightforward account of power in global value chains: big companies have the power to require producers to comply with particular standards because they control a large portion of the global tea market. Pieter's interruption complicates Thijs's account by adding a new actor – 'the market' – into the mix. In contrast with Thijs, Pieter doesn't see customers as the most important (or the most powerful) players when it comes to deciding whether or not tea should be certified.

As with Helena's understanding of the market's ability to drive incentives and help achieve certain goals, Pieter's understanding of the market does not simply obscure power relations that were otherwise quite clear in Thijs's account, but identifies a new actor whose power also has to be considered.

In a different standards development organization, Matthew met Rupert, who had spent the past few years managing the design and publication of a sustainability standard for cocoa, which he hoped would serve as a model for the future development of other crop-specific standards for tea, coffee, etc. For nearly an hour, Rupert talked about all the work that goes into producing a great standard, one that will generate the most positive social and environmental impacts, one that improves the lives and livelihoods of farmers throughout the Global South, work that involves not only technical expertise in everything from chemistry to marketing, but also a lot of emotional labour, visiting poor farmers, hearing and digesting their stories, and so on. He talked about children not being able to receive high-quality education, even when such education was available nearby, because they were forced to work on their parents' farms, to say nothing of the problem of child slavery, which is especially prevalent in the cocoa industry. Contributing to the solution of these problems is what drives him in his work.

It was surprising, then, when in response to a question about what happens to a standard after it's published, he flung his arms up and said:

Then it's up to the market to say what they're going to do. And we'll have to see if it will be used, or if the only thing that happens is if [competing standards organizations] change their systems, or what [ever else] is going to happen, or if producer countries make their own scheme owners and certification organizations. That's also a possibility that they can do that. So it's open for a lot of things that might happen. The producers of cocoa might make an independent organization that can be a scheme owner and they use that and can go that way. So now it's up to the market to decide what they are going to do.

After all this work, Rupert hands off his standard to 'the market', which, for him, is capable of 'saying' something about the standard and 'deciding' what to do. Moreover, by insisting that 'it's up to the market' to say or decide what they are going to do, he not only imagines the market as an agent that is capable, but also as one that is responsible for saying something and making a decision. There is also something interesting about Rupert's choice of pronouns. In his decision to use 'they' rather than 'it' to refer to the market, one wonders if he is tacitly recognizing that 'the market' is not some abstract thing but a collection of identifiable actors, a 'they' constituted by companies like Nestlé and Unilever, commodities traders, governments and so on.

This tacit recognition appears in other instances as well. Having already conducted participant observation in a sustainability standards organization, Matthew knew from interlocutors there that standards developers are increasingly committed to collecting and sharing data about numerous aspects of tea

production, from the volume tea factories are selling, at what price and to whom, in addition to more expected data about labour conditions (e.g. wages, number of workers, instances of harassment, etc.) and environmental impacts (e.g. pesticide use, distance between farms and forests, distance between farms and rivers, etc.). However, many of these indicators are closely guarded industry secrets. At one point during Matthew's interview with the two tea traders we met above, Pieter interrupted Thijs after the latter divulged 'roughly' how much tea they buy every year. 'Please don't write that down,' he implored, watching as Matthew scribbled through the number in his notebook, claiming that even a 'ballpark' amount would be enough to reveal the identity of their employer.

Matthew asked how the firm would respond if a sustainability standard required them to disclose that kind of information on some kind of online platform, such as those currently being developed by organizations like the Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade International and other ethical sourcing initiatives. Pieter scoffed, insisting that they would never do that. 'That's a no-go from us.' A hypothetical scenario floated by Matthew, in which their big customers would only buy tea that was certified according to a standard that required this level of 'transparency', however, prompted Thijs to look over to Pieter with a nervous glance. 'Well,' he responded hesitantly, 'in that case we'd just have to see.' He reiterated that when it comes to disclosing 'sensitive trading issues . . . of course we're not in favour of that', but that if it's required of them, they will of course consider it: 'I wouldn't say that we wouldn't participate in [that kind of initiative], because if the market is really demanding this from us, we have to look into it.'

One thing that is interesting here is how quickly Pieter's confidence that his firm would never disclose that kind of information faltered when faced with the hypothetical situation of a big customer who required it, suggesting, again, a relatively straightforward account of the power relations between tea traders and the large tea packers that constitute their 'big customers', a relationship that is mediated by standards development organizations. Even more interesting is the way these interlocutors seemed more comfortable being disempowered by 'the market' than by specific customers, transforming something that was in one instance a 'no-go' into something that they would have to consider.

They say the world market has become bad

In the beginning of 2020, Hannah spent time with a smallholder tea farmers' cooperative in Kericho, who were supplying Rainforest Alliance-certified tea to a Kericho-based multinational tea plantation company, which processed green leaf supplied by outgrowers in two of its factories. The multinational had started sourcing green leaf from smallholders since the repeal of the Tea Act in 2008, which liberalized the smallholder sector and allowed smallholder farmers to supply multinational and other private tea factories in addition to Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) factories, which had formerly held the monopoly over smallholder tea. In an introductory meeting with Silas, the manager of the

cooperative, and Wilson, a ‘lead farmer’ charged with checking compliance with sustainability standards of cooperative members ahead of third-party audits, Silas explained that, in the context of the reform, farmers could ‘move to greener pastures’. Most of the members of the tea cooperative supplied multiple factories, weighing up decisions as to how much to send where according to the price paid per kilogram of green leaf, the stringency of a factory’s quality standards, and the efficiency of a factory’s collection of smallholders’ tea. KTDA, for example, was generally known to pay higher prices for tea: a steady monthly rate that was comparable with multinational and other privately owned factories and a significantly higher second payment, paid out twice a year as a lump sum known as the ‘bonus’. But KTDA was also renowned for having logistical and capacity issues. Fresh-plucked tea, known as green leaf, is highly perishable and must be processed within 24 hours of harvesting. Farmers talked about occasions when they would wait in buying centres for KTDA vehicles to collect their leaf late into the night. ‘You just go home for supper and come back [to the leaf collection centre] with a heavy jacket’, Silas explained, the jacket being an important detail in the context of Kericho’s notoriously chilly evenings. By the time the KTDA trucks finally rolled in, some farmers would find that their tea had deteriorated beyond being acceptable. As a risk-balancing strategy, many chose to send at least some of their leaf to private and multinational factories that paid less but were timely in terms of green leaf collection.

With the exception of some private factories in the area that had very recently been established by Kenyan investors, most factories to which smallholders supply green leaf are certified by the Rainforest Alliance standard, while some multinational factories and KTDA factories are also Fairtrade certified. As a result, virtually all smallholders in Kericho are Rainforest Alliance certified. This has no direct bearing on farmer income. The Mombasa tea auction, where the majority of Kenyan tea is sold, is awash with Rainforest Alliance-certified tea due to Unilever’s (and subsequently other big buyers’) decision to buy Rainforest Alliance-certified tea only. Fairtrade does not have a direct bearing on farmer income either, since the premium paid for Fairtrade-certified tea by buyers must go into projects that serve smallholder farmers’ communities, such as a new building for a local school or a water tank, rather than go directly into farmers’ pockets. As ethnographies of Fairtrade in Kenya have shown, the premium can be highly contested at the community level, with discrepancies between Fairtrade’s and farmers’ visions of what constitutes an appropriate ‘community’ project (Kim et al., 2019), debate over who should represent marginalized farmers on the committees that administer premium funds, and resentment that premium projects are also enjoyed by non-tea producers (Dolan, 2008). Being certified, in sum, does not increase the price farmers get for their tea but is supposed to improve farmer livelihoods indirectly, through increasing productivity and efficiency as well as (in the case of Fairtrade) improving the wellbeing of farming communities through community projects. In early 2020, prices of tea at the Mombasa auction were at an all-time low and farmers were left puzzling as to why their tea, that was grown

and harvested as it always had been and was now certified as demanded by buyers, was fetching significantly less than it had in previous years.

Sitting in the cooperative's small boardroom, at the back of its office in the rural market centre that serves the smallholder tea-farming area where cooperative members are based, Silas explained that the multinational company that the cooperative supplied green leaf to had recently reduced the price paid to outgrowers from 19 to 16 Kenyan Shillings per kilogram. This reduction, he explained, was because of 'market forces out there'. Silas and Wilson went on to describe the challenges of ensuring cooperative members' compliance with sustainability standards in the context of low prices. Silas generically quoted members to convey their resistance to standards: 'This money's not enough to do PPEs [personal protective equipment], chemical store, waste segregation! So go back and get me a good price and [then] I'll agree with you.'

Silas's attribution of agency to 'the market' as an arbiter of low prices, in spite of farmers' uptake of sustainability standards, resonated throughout Hannah's fieldwork among smallholder tea farmers who are members of the cooperative. One young farmer, Felix, unmarried and in his early 30s, was growing tea on half an acre of land which he had been allocated from a larger piece of land owned by his parents. He also had a nursery of tea plants which he sold to his neighbours, owned a couple of dairy cows and grew some maize for subsistence use, and ran a small kiosk at the front of his plot where he could attract customers from the road. Sitting inside his kiosk, Felix showed receipts from the scales used at different tea factories' leaf collection centres to demonstrate that he split his tea between the local KTDA factory and the multinational that he is able to supply through his membership of the cooperative. He, like Silas, commented on the recent drop in price, and similarly attributed it to the market: 'We've tried asking and we've heard it's because of [the] market.' According to another farmer, Peter, an elderly member of the cooperative who had been growing tea on his small farm since the 1970s, 'You can complain [about the price] but tea depends on the market.' While this initial description of the market as an arbiter of price seemed relatively uncritical, as our conversation went on Peter suggested that 'the market' was somewhat opaque. Referencing a regional difference in bonus payments made to Kericho farmers compared to central Kenyan farmers who had recently received significantly higher second payments, he went on: 'We hear in some places prices are high. Why is my price low and in other places it is high?'

Janet, a widow in her early 60s who had inherited 2 acres of land from her late husband and who is also a member of the cooperative Silas manages, similarly questioned the adequacy of 'the market' as an explanation for low prices. Struggling on a low income from tea, she had tried diversifying into French beans, a new cash crop relative to tea, but without success. In spite of her farm having been used as an example to aspiring farmers of how to cultivate French beans, she received next to nothing for a batch she had given to an intermediary to sell on her behalf and was given the explanation that the crop had failed to meet quality standards. Bewildered and frustrated, she uprooted all the plants. Tea was

more familiar and reliable, yet the price was low. ‘The price of tea at times it doesn’t make you happy’, Janet said. ‘But it’s country-wide. At times they say the world market has become bad (*imefilisika*). At times it goes up, times it goes down. There is no fixed price. Especially from 2013 the price was up. But last year and this year . . . even from 2016 it was low.’

The liberalization of the smallholder sector in 2008 had enabled farmers to shop around for better prices, but in the context of low prices across the sector in 2020, farmers had little scope in their search for greener pastures. A factory might initially entice farmers with higher prices but would later drop the price. Janet explained that the multinational that the cooperative supplies initially paid 40 Kenyan Shillings per kilogram of green leaf, but that the price had started to drop in 2016 down to its all-time low in early 2020 of 16 Shillings. Janet lamented that this dramatic fall in price tended to be explained away by managers at the multinational company with reference to the ‘world market’. ‘Charles [a manager at the multinational who deals with smallholder outgrowers] doesn’t answer his phone these days’, she complained. ‘Maybe they don’t have an answer. If they could come to the ground and tell us really: “the price of tea has gone down because of this and this”. But if they just say “world market”, “fluctuation” . . .’ Janet tailed off.

Although farmers rarely stated it explicitly, popular suspicion abounds in Kenya as to the cause of low prices (Elliott and Skrydstrup, 2021). This suspicion was expressed in the President’s State of the Nation address at the beginning of 2020, where he announced that his administration was launching an investigation into the tea sector to address the problem of low tea prices. The directive spoke directly to the hundreds of thousands of smallholder tea farmers who form large voting constituencies in central Kenya and west of the Rift Valley, including Kericho. In his speech, the President directly mentioned ‘operational and governance challenges’ by the KTDA as well as the systems through which Kenyan tea is marketed. In an interview with Hannah, the Kericho County Governor, even more invested in gaining the support of smallholder farmers who form a substantial part of his voter base, was more candid about his suspicions about the ways tea marketing worked. Brokers who taste and value tea, he claimed, collude with big buyers in the fixing of prices at the Mombasa tea auction. He suggested that brokers found ways of bumping up prices of tea derived from their home regions, thus explaining the price differential between tea grown in central Kenya and tea grown in Kericho. Citing the fact that multinationals such as Unilever who grow tea on plantations in Kenya are also big buyers at the auction via subsidiary companies, he argued that these buyers colluded in keeping prices down and then covered this up with the argument that their own plantations, like smallholder producers, also suffered from low prices.

They have a plantation [and] a subsidiary company that does marketing and they’re talking as if they are different. Because they don’t want to make a profit for the plantation, they depress markets. . . . They depress prices broadly at Mombasa and

then go and blend [tea] out there and sell at 100 times the profit. Unilever is then pointing at losses, saying we're also suffering [because they too are tea producers].

The Governor's point was that, overall, Unilever as the parent firm was profiting from this arrangement, even if its tea-producing branch in Kenya was making a loss.

These suspicions about the 'real' goings on behind the explanation that low prices of certified sustainable tea were due to 'the market' convey that smallholder producers and their political representatives deemed 'the market' as a cover for manipulations and distortions by those who have historically held power in Kenya's tea sector, namely the KTDA, tea brokers and multinational tea companies. At the same time, some faith was still invested in the idea of a 'perfect market' which wasn't influenced by power and politics, a market that the President's directive, among other initiatives, was supposed to bring about. In other words, 'the market' as a powerful actor was named but also critiqued by smallholders and their political representatives, so that it became not a faceless and apolitical or agnostic force but a contextualized collusion of powerful actors. This conceptualization provided grounds for action that sought to challenge the status quo of the supply chain's workings and to ensure fairer remuneration of smallholder producers.

Conclusion

Across our distinct but inextricably connected field sites, big tea buyers – and most notably Unilever – were viewed as among the most powerful actors in the global tea industry who ultimately defined the terms upon which certified sustainable tea production and trade took place. Our interlocutors' invocation of 'the market' as determining these outcomes both obscured this power and gave them a chance to critique it. Identifying 'the market' as an agent which determined the price of tea paid out to smallholder farmers, the practices of traders, or the effectiveness of a sustainability standard had depoliticizing effects by rendering power diffuse and faceless, and obscuring possibilities for political action. At the same time, our interlocutors on occasions also qualified 'the market' by naming particular powerful actors like Unilever, thus giving power a face.

This tacking between 'the market' as a faceless, apolitical force and 'the market' as a particular set of powerful actors, we suggest, can be seen as a mode of engagement in global supply chains that are increasingly governed by a panoply of competing market-based sustainability standards which further empower lead firms (Ponte, 2019; Ponte et al., 2011). For standards developers like Helena and Rupert, deferring to 'the market' affirms the *raison d'être* of the market-based sustainability standards organizations that employ them, that is, the neoliberal ideological commitment to viewing markets as agents of change, or 'siding with the market', to use Helena's words. These interlocutors are clearly invested in the idea of 'the market' as a force that determines the effects of the standards they

design and disseminate; challenging this idea would undermine the very basis of their work. For tea traders like Pieter and Thijs, ‘the market’ can make them do things that they wouldn’t otherwise, including in the name of ‘transparency’ (which often works as a synonym for ‘sustainability’). At the same time, they also name big buyers like Unilever as drivers of now ubiquitous certification regimes such as Rainforest Alliance’s that leave producers with little choice but to comply with their standards. Among smallholder farmers and their political representatives, invoking ‘the market’ as a determinant of low prices might be seen as a strategy of avoiding critique, in particular in the context of their engagement with a foreign researcher (who often had to emphasize that she did not work for Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade or, indeed, any of the multinationals operating in Kericho). At the same time, they implicitly and (in the case of the Kericho Governor) on occasions explicitly sought to peel back the mask of ‘the market’ to reveal its ‘underneath’ (cf. Ferme, 2001), in doing so identifying particular configurations of powerful actors, including big buyers like Unilever.

Deflecting agency to ‘the market’ thus disables political action against big buyers, while efforts to give ‘the market’ a face potentially enable it. This becomes most clear from the perspective of smallholders and their political representatives where investigations into the tea industry sought to reveal the political economy behind the ubiquitous claim that low prices were down to ‘the market’. But it also implicitly shows up in conversations with Rupert (the ‘they’ he refers to when talking about the market) and in Thijs’ reflections on how it is big buyers like Unilever who have ensured that a standard like Rainforest Alliance’s has become so ubiquitous in a tea-producing country like Kenya.

While much work has been done in global value chain studies to map and delineate power in global supply chains, less attention has been paid to the power of *ideas* about power, in this case the neoliberal idea that ‘the market’ determines outcomes and which is integral to contemporary voluntary sustainability standards (but see Dallas et al., 2019). As our article has shown, attributing power to ‘the market’ maintains the status quo, while efforts to give a face to power can potentially challenge it. In a world where the power of lead firms is only further bolstered by sustainability standards, which are often mapped onto co-opted notions of justice and equal exchange (Besky, 2014; Blowfield and Dolan, 2010; Dolan, 2010; Sen, 2017), tacking between the two is a mode of engagement which mitigates the risk of exclusion while at the same time opening up the possibility of imagining an alternative.

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Note

1. Hannah conducted fieldwork in Kiambu and Kericho Counties, Kenya between October and November 2018, and between January and March 2020, as well as carrying out interviews and archival research in Nairobi. Between autumn 2018 and spring 2020, Matthew conducted nearly two months of fieldwork in the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, and the US, as well as a number of interviews with 'key informants' via Skype.

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