

Coffee, Capitalism and Social Justice

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Abstract

Coffee is as seductive of a beverage as it is controversial as a commodity. One of the most traded, and consumed, products on the planet is served with a back-story of human rights abuses, plantation labor practices, and inequality. This conflicted commodity serves as the focus of an interdisciplinary qualitative study—to explore the international management of coffee through a lens of social justice and highlight examples of humane coffee commerce in the Americas. The researchers traveled to Ecuador in 2018 with six students. The results of the experience indicated that students gained a unique perspective through in vivo research.

Keywords: Ecuador, Coffee, International Management, Capitalism, Social Justice

1.1 Introduction

Study abroad in higher education, particularly in the international business area, can expose students to business practices of the visiting country, clarify how those businesses may differ from their home country in culture and norms of operation, and lead to an understanding of the importance of interpreting how differences in cultural dimensions affect both commerce and society.

Educators, trying to prepare students to compete in the international business arena, introduce theories in the classroom, with activities and assignments to reinforce the course concepts, frequently recognizing that the knowledge discussed in a classroom could be combined with an experiential learning experience to deepen cross-cultural competence.

First-hand knowledge of cultural differences, gained through a study abroad program, could be an irreplaceable event in a student's transformative learning journey. International management scholars should explore the potential of short-term trips, when student finances or scheduling conflicts are a concern, and students may be hesitant to commit to a longer time abroad. Institution finances may also be a concern with limited funding to send faculty abroad and support study abroad opportunities.

Management scholars are increasingly encouraged to explore the role of the corporation in contemporary society and its obligation to future generations (Mayer, Wright, &Pham, 2017).The problem addressed in this study is that developing empathy of the effect of harmful business practices in pursuit of profits and disregard for employees, the community, and society is difficult without an actual direct experience. While classroom lectures, video, and guest lectures introduce topics, is there a personal connection to the issues at hand missing without in vivo experience?

Combining an international management short-term study abroad with a cultural and social justice topic, such as the agriculture crop of coffee, could lead to an appreciation of the impact business practices have on a culture and a discussion of the future role of capitalism in the 21st century.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore if six college students on a short-term study abroad trip to Ecuador appreciate the impact of business practices of coffee production on culture and society. The questions the study sought to answer were: What is your conception of South America? Of Ecuador in particular? As Ecuador is a coffee producing country, and we will be studying coffee in terms of culture and management, what is your knowledge today of coffee production?

Our study begins by briefly reviewing literature on South American coffee production, the possible changing practices of production, and the advancement of social justice practices within coffee. In addition, we will supplement with background information on Ecuador.

2.1 Coffee

Coffee has been one of South America's most important commodities, and until recently, was seen as a 'forever' source of income with Brazil being the single largest exporter of the commodity in the world (Volsi et al., 2018). Today climate change, change in agricultural practices and intense competition from Africa and South-East Asia have diminished South American coffee production. In the case of Ecuador, the production has dropped to only 1% of world production (Equal Exchange, 2020). As the thirst for 'cheap' coffee expands in capitalistic free markets, the quest for social justice within the producing nation becomes evident. Countries that produce coffee do not reap the rewards of this incredibly popular commodity.

2.2 Capitalism

University business classrooms usually introduce the concepts of maximizing efficiency and effectiveness in organizational operations fairly early in the business curriculum. These concepts are emphasized as key roles for managers. This often equates with the maximization of profit. Much of the focus on the maximization of profits of businesses has been attributed to well-known American economist, Milton Friedman and the publication of his article, *A Friedman doctrine: The social responsibility of business is to increase profits* (1970). In this article, Friedman said, "If leaders are concerned about employees, communities and the environment they are practicing socialism" (1970, p. 33). Friedman is considered to have been very influential with many corporate executives in the time since the article was published.

Fotaki and Prasad (2015) explored how economic inequality is addressed in business school curriculums through neoliberal capitalism and insufficient examination of how businesses generate and maintain economic inequality. They proposed questioning neoliberal capitalism as an important step in transforming business schools and "catalyzing transformative social and economic change" (p. 573).

In recent decades, the US has seen examples of businesses following the principle of maximization of profit without consideration of fairness in wages, benefits and harm to the community. The result of disregarding workers, communities and the environment has been evident in some large industries and includes the use of unfair wages, gender inequality, and pollution or contamination of natural resources (Green, 2019). Recently, there have been societal shifts towards justice in markets and for worker and environmental equity. Accordingly, in 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This agenda emphasizes a holistic approach to achieving sustainable development. The 17 goals are considered interconnected and address global challenges such as poverty, climate change, gender equality, water waste, work and economic growth, responsible development, and peace and justice (United Nations, 2015). All topics are very relevant in the business realm.

Future leaders should be trained to go beyond giving back to their local community and consider the implications business practices have on the global community. This type of training in business aligns with the conscious capitalism movement popularized by Mackey and Sismond, (2013), which is a way of operating corporations and other organizations that goes beyond corporate social responsibility practices to consider making the world a better place in addition to providing shareholder value.

The number of successful companies that have implemented sustainable business practices and identified as conscious capitalist firms has risen rapidly. Firms such as Whole Foods Market, Panera Bread, TOMS, and the Container Store all are characterized as conscious capitalist corporations.

Despite the growing shift towards conscious capitalism, Eckhart and Dobscha (2018) found that there are failures in its practices, and expectations for consumer responsibility. In their case study analysis of Panera Cafes, a division of Panera Bread and self-identified conscious capitalist organization, efforts to engage their customers in the social issue of food insecurity were largely unsuccessful with four out of the five Panera Cafes eventually closing at the time of their study. Panera Cafes asked consumers to pay what they felt was appropriate for their food and drink, a recommended donation was provided for each item with about 20% of customers paying more, 20% paying less and 60% paying the recommended amount (Romeo, 2012).

2.3 Social Justice

Concerning coffee in the Americas, one such movement for sustainable business practices is Ecoalburgue La Fundadora in Nicaragua. Built by incorporating relics of Nicaragua's anti-imperialistic revolution, this all-encompassing foundation offers the outside world the ability to participate in coffee-growing practices, local food movements, and educational facilities (Ecoalburgue La Fundadora, 2020). In the north, such companies as Dean's Beans, centered in Massachusetts, is a for-profit company that is dedicated to making personal relationships with organic, fair-trade growers in Colombia (Cosurca) and Nicaragua (Prodecoop). These relationships expand consumer responsibility as we become involved in the well-being of the grower and their crop (Dean's Beans, 2020).

Regardless of justice initiatives, the current COVID-19 global crisis has brought to the forefront inequalities with vulnerable groups particularly affected by the pandemic (United Nations, 2020). Developing economies, due to their high levels of informal work and lack of social protections are at risk for even more disparities as they suffered a 60% drop in earnings in just the first month of the crisis (United Nations, 2020). As unemployment increases and the economic fallout from the pandemic is still unknown, all economies have been affected and businesses practices will change because of the crisis. The World Economic Forum (2020) suggests that capitalism should be 'reset' and have three main components; (1) steer the market towards fairer outcomes and improve coordination among governments, (2) improve large-scale spending programs to include goals such as equality and sustainability, and (3) utilize the innovations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to support the public good, addressing health and social challenges. These three components represent *The Great Reset Initiative*.

In considering the development of future business leaders, perhaps business leaders in the north can take lessons from Latin American practices, such as those the team experienced in Ecuador. Thematically, the student-participants on this delegation took part in hands-on, local initiatives that relied on community members as a workforce, and shareholders. While Ecuador has slipped from a world-leader in coffee production, it has regained some dignity in small, human-scale operations that keep in mind humans and the environment. Some of these lessons are highlighted in the student response sections regarding coffee.

2.4 Ecuador

Ecuador, a country susceptible to natural disasters, has long suffered from economic disparity due to inadequate development and lack of mobility within social classes. The top 10% of Ecuadorians hold over a third of all the common wealth in the country, while the bottom 20%, only collect 3.3% of the wealth (Johnson, 2011). Johnson (2011, p. 43) further states, "some 52 percent of Ecuadorians live on less than two dollars a day, and 20 percent get by on a dollar a day or less." This highlights that distribution of wealth within Ecuador is unfairly disproportional. The distance between upper and lower classes then leads to the lack of mobility between classes. Even though a financial crisis affected every class, the rich were still rich, the poor were still poor, and those in between remained unchanged.

Although the country still suffers from inadequate development and continues to perpetuate a financially backed class system, there have been efforts to improve standards of living and, in turn, improve the economy of the country. In the late 1990s, there was an economic recovery program put in place by the Ecuadorian government (Ponce & Vos, 2012). Ecuador began to allocate more money on education to increase the number of skilled workers entering the labor force. In addition to all these changes, "demand for unskilled workers in urban informal services sectors and traditional agriculture outpaced that for other workers" (Ponce & Vos, 2012, p. 2). Sadly, these changes proved impermanent and unsustainable. These efforts were meant to stimulate the economy and workforce after a period of intense and devastating natural and financial disasters, with little outcome.

3.1 Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore if six undergraduate college students on a short-term study abroad trip to Ecuador appreciate the impact of business practices of coffee production on culture. The questions the study sought to answer were: What is your conception of South America? Of Ecuador in particular?

As Ecuador is a coffee producing country, and we will be studying coffee in terms of culture and management, what is your knowledge today of coffee production?

The study assumed the Classification Approach of interdisciplinary research, developed by Szostak, Gnoli, and Lopez-Huertas (2016). In this manner, faculty and students will initially disregard their respective disciplines and relate the issue directly to the phenomena (Repko, 2008). This approach allows the study group to go beyond the limits of their restrictive backgrounds, and accept the problem in its natural, and entire, form. Later the issue will be analyzed through the lens of their discipline and critiqued by respective methods.

One of the learning outcomes for the project was to critique coffee production through social justice and a Latin American focus. Travel and in situ exploration assisted in this goal, as did theoretical instruction prior to travel. Two books were selected for the course, one, *Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galeano, was adopted due to its treatment of Latin America from a southern-hemispheric perspective. Galeano's text is forthright in its stance on social and economic justice issues. "Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything [here] has always been transmuted into European—and later United States—capital and as such has accumulated in distant centers of power" (Galeano, 1997, p. 2). This critical view was assumed by students in country to introduce the forces behind coffee production and fair practices. The second text by Torre and Striffler (2009), fleshed out preliminary discussions by supplying balanced reporting on culture, politics, and sociological movements in Ecuador.

In addition to the readings, students were asked to capture their experience using their smartphone, mobile device or camera. Some prompts were given such as looking for a different fruit, visiting a store, etc. Visual aids can help capture a study abroad experience and serve as a communication and reflection tool on the experience (Boisfontaine, 2012). Students are able to not only remember the trip but also reflect on it and share the knowledge with family, friends, future study abroad students, the university, and community. The students were required to create a micro-movie after the trip as part of the course assessments. In addition, students participated in an in-country lecture at a coffee retailer, Galletti, who had significant relationships with local producers from the area. This experience turned out to be a popular reference point for the students according to their post-trip papers. Lastly, the group participated in a tour of an eco-chocolate producer outside of Guayaquil as a comparison of social justice commerce.

3.2 Participants

Six undergraduate students participated in the trip for the three-credit hour course. Other students, two researchers, and three community members traveled with the group during the university spring break, March 2018. Three of the students were business majors, two of which were in an international management course a previous semester with one of the researchers. Three other students were registered in the Latin American Regional Studies courses at our home university. These courses were taught from a social justice lens and blended organically with the focus of the immersion experience and research project. The study was approved by the institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and participants signed an informed consent form.

3.3 Data Collection

Students were required to complete both pre-trip and post-trip papers. Prior to writing the pre-trip paper, students were expected to research Ecuador and South American cultures to gain a foundation of cultural implications. The conditions of the pre-trip paper required each student to list five examples of how they hoped to address the course objectives during the trip, five personal or professional goals they wished to accomplish on the trip, and to discuss their preconceptions of South America and their knowledge of coffee production and the coffee industry. When the papers were completed, they were uploaded by each student to the learning management system (LMS) and then reviewed by the researchers.

4.1 Summary of Results

4.2 Excerpts from pre-trip papers

Student A

"I knew their coffee industry existed because my uncle is a coffee bean roaster and distributor. After some research, I've learned that Ecuador is a fantastic place to for coffee to grow. Back in the 1970s, coffee was one of Ecuador's main exports. Then in the 1980s there was a crash in the coffee market prices, causing the prices to become so low that it became too expensive to produce coffee. Even though Ecuador definitely has the land and resources needed to grow high quality coffee beans, it's not economically worth it in comparison to growing cheaper, lower quality coffee beans

needed for instant coffee, which is also a profitable export. Ecuador also drink[s] more instant coffee than higher quality coffee as well, so the need to produce high quality beans isn't a top priority.

Student B

“Coffee production for Ecuador is a huge element of their agriculture and trading system. Coffee production became of high value in the mid-1970s, but low prices and a decline in harvest negatively impacted revenue for about a decade. The National Coffee Council was created to increase coffee revenue and better production for the farmers, but the small farmers have observed the COFENAC has contributed to the decline in access for Ecuadorian coffee. About half a million people depend on it for their livelihood, which has put small farmers and their families in poverty which results in abandonment of their coffee plantations. Because these farmers are not able to afford to continue to do the one thing that keeps their families thriving, they end up migrating to other countries.”

Student C

“Coffee is the largest hot beverage traded worldwide, with the coffee industry bringing in billions of dollars per year in exports. The coffee production process involves farmers growing the coffee plants on plantations, where they will harvest the fruits and remove the bean. The beans are left to dry, and from there they can either be shipped as is or processed further. If they are to be processed further, then they may be seasoned and aged to add flavor. While this is more expensive and time consuming, it brings in a much larger revenue for the farmers who are able to do it.”

Student D

“I am very aware about Ecuador's coffee production; however I am not that knowledgeable in the coffee industry. Typically when I am at a coffee house, I drink tea or hot chocolate.”

Student E

“I do not have much knowledge at all in coffee production. I know that it comes in all different forms and flavors and that it comes from a coffee bean, but other than the basics, I am not familiar with the production of coffee. Since Ecuador is known for their coffee I am excited to learn about how they can create it and then do some research and compare it what we do here in America. Coffee is looked at as almost a luxury, but also something people need to help them make it through the day. I am excited to see how this differs in Ecuador. Do they produce coffee as a luxury; does it have something to do with their culture? I am curious to find out what the differences are.”

Student F

“Agriculture is a very important part of Ecuador's economy. The plantation owners are wealthy people, but the workers are paid very low wages. Some plantations have adopted fair-trade principles, which allow workers to be paid a fair wage for the work that is [done] in one day. I believe it will be powerful for our group to see the difference between fair-trade plantations and plantations without regulations.”

4.3 Post-trip paper excerpts**Student A**

“I learned more than I ever would have in a classroom setting...As for coffee production, I found what we learned at Galletti to be very interesting. Not only was their coffee good enough to make someone who isn't a coffee drinker (me) like coffee, but I also really love how they get their beans. Ecuador is a great place to grow high quality coffee beans, which used to be one of their main exports. When the cheaper, instant coffee market took over more though, Ecuador had to adapt and stopped making the high-quality beans in favor of the cheaper instant coffee beans. Since there's a new a trend of specialty coffees gaining popularity, there's a chance it could revitalize Ecuador's high quality coffee industry. I think places like Galletti are ahead of the curve in that aspect. Not only are they making great coffee but they are also producing in a very forward-thinking way. Starting domestic abuse survivors up with their own small plot of land with trees, teaching them the skills on how to harvest and get the beans ready, and then also sharing profits with them so they have income and a sustainable living. It'd be nice to see people of all the different backgrounds and geographical locations of Ecuador someday being able to bring their coffee exports up in popularity so people across the world can enjoy it often. In Ecuador, their chocolate is much more commercially available and arguably more popular than their high-quality coffee”

Student B

“Coffee production in Ecuador is not as prominent in the trading business currently as had imagined due to historical pricing fluctuation. The graph of coffee prices, like those of all tropical products, has always resembled a clinical epilepsy chart – more than ever when it shows the value of coffee in exchange for machinery and industrial products”
“... The price of coffee began to fall regularly between 1964 and 1968, which made Brazil lose over \$65 million per decrease by one cent while the United States gained millions from Brazil. For Ecuador, the decrease in cost for coffee put small farmers and their families in poverty, which resulted in abandoned coffee plantations and migration to other countries. While in Ecuador, it was easy to see pricing differences compared to the United States. Ecuador is not a wealthy country, so oil, agriculture, and tourism is important for the communities to continue to thrive.”

Student C

“Coffee is an incredibly valuable commodity that is traded all across the globe with a very large amount coming from south America. The top two countries from which coffee is imported to the United States are Brazil and Columbia, which total over \$2.3 billion, with some even more impressive \$8.1 billion dollars in worldwide exportation. Ecuador differs from a lot of the South American countries, however, in the sense that most of the coffee it produces is consumed in country.

Coffee exportation has started becoming a more popular thing to do in Ecuador, but it is still nowhere near as common as other countries, with Ecuador only contributing to \$16 million of worldwide exports.

Something that I learned is a large problem currently being faced by the coffee industry in Ecuador is inequality faced by female workers. A large number of the workers who grow the coffee plants, collect the fruit, separate the bean, and prepare the end product are female, yet the majority if not all of the income in coffee plantations goes to the male owners. There are forces currently working to fight against this, such as the coffee shop we visited while in Ecuador, Café Galletti. The owners are currently working to create a better workplace for women in the coffee industry by purchasing their beans from coffee plantations that are fully owned by women, as well as donating to organizations that help women succeed in creating their own plantations or advancing in their careers in other ways.”

Student D

“My strong disliked faith for coffee was also strengthened. I tried a multitude of different blends of coffee and can still agree that my taste buds do not enjoy coffee. We learned about how coffee was one of the main exports for Ecuador’s income and how business benefits from selling coffee. Coffee [is] plays a strong role in their economy and is a must have for many tourists that visit the country. My mother and grandmother made sure that I got them coffee, as they are big fans of the beverage. My uncle has visited Ecuador many times and it was actually intriguing now that we have both been to the country.”

Student E

“Before going on this trip I knew next to nothing about coffee production. I knew that we, as Americans, consume a ridiculous amount of coffee every single day. I knew that coffee was looked at as keeping someone awake to make it through the day. It was the first thing some people needed in the morning, almost like a morning cigarette. It’s like an addiction to some that they just can’t quit. I knew that coffee can come grounded up, or in bean form. I knew there were different roasts and potencies. I knew all these factors about coffee, but I never really knew how it was actually produced. After going on this trip, and visiting a coffee shop, I now have a some more insight, and knowledge, into coffee production, and about coffee in general. I learned that coffee can either be dried or washed. Most of the time the coffee is washed, because drying the coffee gives it a fruitier flavor. I also learned that the lighter the coffee the more caffeine it obtains. I found this really interesting because I feel like a lot of people think that the darker the roast, the stronger the coffee. I know this is what I thought before this visit as well. It is true that the darker the coffee the stronger it will taste, but it does not mean that it is actually stronger in caffeination... I really loved that they had a whole table set up for us to where we could try many different types of coffee. I learned that Ecuadorians tend to like their coffee with a burnt flavor to it. I also found out that I like coffee this way. After going to Ecuador and having their coffee, I find it hard to go to Dunkin and drink their coffee now. It seems more watered down to me, and a little too sweet. I also learned that the specific coffee shop we visited was all homemade and home grown. I thought it was really cool to hear their story. That the father was so tired of not being able to find good coffee, so he started making his own. Galeano (1997) stated that coffee was in the height of its prosperity in 1910 (p. 88). With that being said, I find it really interesting that coffee is still so popular today, and honestly, I do not think that coffee will ever go out of style; especially not in Ecuador because it is so good. Although I learned a lot from our one short visit to a coffee shop, I think I was expecting a little bit more. Coffee didn’t seem to be as prominent as I had originally thought beforehand.”

Student F

“The Ecuadorian economy is heavily driven by the production of bananas, coffee, and cacao (Galeano,1973). The coffee grown in Ecuador is often considered a specialty drink. The flavor of Ecuadorian coffee varies depending on the altitude it is grown at and the landscape makes harvesting the beans very expensive. The coffee Ecuador grows is only a small portion of the global market. Colombia, the country just North of Ecuador, has a much larger portion of the global market because the land is level and harvesting can be done with farming equipment. Most of the beans that go to the big coffee companies are grown in Colombia. Ecuador has also begun implementing organizations that are similar to unions that help the farmers earn fair wages. Women do most of the farming and these organizations help women with education and advancing professionally. This system of integrated social responsibility also contributes to the higher price of Ecuadorian coffee.”

5.1 Discussion

Summary of results

Based on the pre- and post-trip papers the general sense from the international experience could be summed into two areas: Improvement of understanding of Ecuador, and a greater appreciation for coffee production and social justice within that country’s borders. The students provided detailed accounts at the impact of the experience, and the following conclusions are based on a comparison between pre-trip and post-trip measurements.

5.2 Conclusions based on results

Students indicated that they would not have gained the depth and breadth of information without the in situ experience. Student A recalls that pairing pre-trip data (Open Veins of Latin America) with a visit to the Galletti retail outlet to reinforce the importance of Ecuadorean practices and relationships. In addition, Students B and F noted that it would have been difficult to determine the decimation of coffee infrastructure (due to falling prices and intense competition) without being in-country. Again, pre-trip educational exposure is vital to the immersion learnings. Another aspect of production came from Student E’s response that Ecuador (like all coffee-producing nations) maintains its own practices, flavors, and between-community relationships to provide a commodity. Student E was impressed with how scientific, and long-standing, some of these practices appeared. One surprise came from Student C who noted the inequality between male and female workers in coffee. This student highlighted data we gathered from a series of lectures on women and movements to level Ecuador gender relations within business. Again, without an immersion experience these data could only be gained from empirical data.

5.3 Interpretation of findings

The findings of one student, and to a larger extent the field study, touch on two requirements: Pre-, in situ, and post-trip learnings. The students who took part in the experience reported that each section of the chain was essential to build upon the previous lesson. This was evident in their changed assessment of how coffee is produced in Ecuador, and how business is changing to become more responsible. Additionally, the students and researchers held a post-trip celebration to share memories, reflections, food, and student-created micro-movies from their experience. The community members were invited and each person in attendance was asked to bring or wear an artifact from the trip.

5.4 Limitations

This project did not employ random sampling or instrument, nor did it engage in quantification of data. Furthermore, the project was in one country only – Ecuador. Therefore, any conclusions cannot be employed to make predictions of the population. The intent in this project was solely to highlight the student-participants and gauge their level of change as a result of the immersion experience.

5.5 Recommendations for further research

At the time of this writing, the higher education international student travel landscape is changing dramatically due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Study abroad at most college campuses has been halted and experiences such as the one discussed in this study are not likely to happen in the foreseeable future. Educators could attempt to simulate the study abroad experience using technology, with tools such as virtual reality, video conferencing, or virtual field trips but the transformation of students would most likely be diminished. Further research is needed to determine the use of technology in simulating an international travel experience.

5.6 Conclusion

This project began with an intention to explore and describe how immersion experiences enhance student understanding of Ecuadorean culture and coffee production. The study was based on pre- and post-trip qualitative measurements, along with direct student report. While each of the students did report an increase in awareness of justice issues regarding coffee, their words indicated a weight put upon the *significance* of the overall experience of being in situ. Indeed, the process of pre-trip learning (in our case, a credit-bearing culture course utilizing Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*), the immersion experience, and post-trip reporting and activities each became salient components. From this study, we can call on study abroad offices and agencies who assist in trip coordination to employ this three-pronged approach to study abroad. The outcomes, in the form of student report, note that each part of the study was essential to bring about the transformative energy associated with international study and travel.

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