

The politics of

COFFEE

COFFEE IS GROWN in 50 countries of the Third World. Coffee is drunk mainly in the rich world, particularly the United States and Europe... countries which in turn sell manufactured goods to the Third World.

Coffee, according to the Pan American Bureau, was the "bargain of the decade" for the US housewife. During the 1960s its price rose by less than 2%, while wages leapt by 40%. So the real cost of coffee fell considerably.

But that bargain spelt disaster for the nations which depended on coffee exports. In 1960 it took 165 sixty-kilogram sacks of beans to buy an American tractor. By the end of the decade 316 bags were needed to pay for that same tractor.

In the early 1960s Washington was haunted by the spectre of revolution in South America. Cuba had already 'fallen' to the communists and guerrilla movements were operating elsewhere.

The 'coffee republics', whose economies had been hit by falling prices, were obviously particularly vulnerable. So the US, which consumed 40% of the world's coffee exports, decided to support an international agreement to stabilise their export earnings.

When the International Coffee Agree-

ment came into effect in 1963, 42 exporting and 17 importing countries had signed it. Voting strength in the International Coffee Organisation (set up to police the agreement) was based on quantities bought and sold. So the US and Brazil were the dominant voices.

During the period when the agreement was in force, between 1963 and 1972, fluctuations in coffee prices were not as they had been in the 1950s. But at the same time galloping inflation in the rich nations meant that the real value of coffee declined.

Between 1951 and 1962 the average price of coffee, expressed in 1975 prices, was \$1.11 a pound. During the eleven years of the agreement the average price fell to 75 cents.

Also, the Americans tended to use the agreement as a political football, causing a good deal of resentment in the Third World. In 1971, for instance, Congress threatened not to renew the agreement when a dispute arose with Brazil over unlicensed American shrimp boats fishing in Brazilian waters.

Producer-consumer co-operation broke down at the end of 1972, mainly as a result of the devaluation of the dollar. Prices in the agreement, which were expressed in dollars, had been automatically lowered by devaluation. So the producers demanded an extra 4 cents a pound in the prices to compensate. The US refused to accept the increase.

More power to the producers?

THE COLLAPSE of the Coffee Agreement coincided with the Arab attempt to force a massive increase in the price of oil. Coffee producers naturally began to wonder if they could do the same as the oil producers.

In 1973 the major coffee producers met at Geneva to try and limit the quantity of coffee sold, so forcing up prices. Brazil, Colombia, the Ivory Coast and Portugal (acting on behalf of Angola) set up a company known as Cafe Mondial, to buy up coffee stocks.

A similar group, Central American

Mild Coffees, was formed shortly afterwards.

But there were difficulties. Oil can be turned off at a tap and left under the ground. So it's fairly easy to restrict the amount sold, and thereby keep prices high. But coffee-growing is a labour intensive industry, so it is difficult to slow down production. Coffee beans can be stockpiled for only three years. After that they begin to deteriorate.

So the coffee growers - like the producers of most primary products - found they simply did not have the power of the oil sheikhs. By mid-1975



Instant disaster

THE RICH countries benefit more from coffee than the nations which actually grow it. When we buy a jar of instant coffee only about 40% of the cost goes on the beans. The rest goes on processing in Britain, packaging, advertising, distribution, and profits.

What's more, Britain actually sells instant coffee to countries like Kenya and Nigeria which produce the beans in the first place.

The producing countries would benefit a great deal if they could make instant coffee. But on the whole they have found it very difficult.

One reason is that consuming countries impose higher customs duties on instant coffee than on the beans, which makes it more expensive to import.

But the main problem is the power of the major coffee companies. The two main ones - Nestles and General Foods (who make Maxwell House) - spend millions of dollars a year on research

and development, so that they control the coffee processing technology.

And because these giants have such a strong hold over the markets, it has become very expensive to launch a new brand of instant coffee.

Brazil, however, has succeeded. Ten instant coffee factories have been set up. By 1967 Brazil had managed to capture about 15% of the American market.

One of the main reasons for this was that the Brazilian government had exempted instant coffee from the stiff export tax on beans.

These imports of Brazilian instant coffee into the US were deemed to be 'unfair competition' because the companies involved were mainly Brazilian, rather than subsidiaries of American firms.

So General Foods, which imports and roasts one-sixth of the world's coffee, lobbied the American government. The US then called on Brazil to withhold its tax concession on instant coffee. Threats were made to cut off American aid and to refuse to renew the International Coffee Agreement.

In 1969, under pressure from the State Department, Brazil levied an export tax of 13 cents a pound on instant coffee. This was less than the American wanted. Two years later Brazil gave in. It agreed to export to the US 560,000 bags of beans, tax-free - equivalent to the amount of instant coffee sold to America.

The result: US importers got cheaper beans and saved nearly 10 million dollars a year. Almost half this sum went to General Foods, and the loser was the Brazilian treasury. The arrangement was only cancelled by Brazil in 1973 when the International Coffee Agreement broke down.

coffee prices, in real terms, had reached the lowest level in thirty years.

In December 1975 sixty-two countries met and negotiated a new coffee agreement. Basically it follows the same pattern as the first agreement, but is slightly more complicated.

Unfortunately this can only be a stop-gap measure. If the purchasing power of coffee is to be maintained, there will have to be a system linking the price of coffee beans with the price of the manufactured goods that the coffee producers have to buy from the rich nations.

Brazil: Who benefits

IN BRAZIL most of the coffee is grown on large estates, mainly between 100 and 500 acres. The fact that 94% of the land belongs to just 6% of the people ensures that the benefits from coffee production go to a tiny minority.

Minimum wages are supposed to offer some protection to workers. But they are of little significance because of the numbers of unemployed who are willing to work for almost any wage.

The estates deduct large amounts for renting accommodation or small pieces of land to their workers. Many workers are employed on a daily basis during harvesting. So for much of the year they are without land or work.

The 'Brazilian miracle' is often quoted by the western press. National income has grown rapidly during the last twenty years. But the benefits have gone to the wealthy. The poorest half of the population receive only 8% of the national income.

As former President Emilo Medici put it: "Brazil is doing well, but the people are not."

Tanzania: A better way

IN TANZANIA more than 600,000 peasants - 15% of the active population - grow coffee.

One of the major coffee-growing areas is the western shore of Lake Victoria, where the farms are normally around two acres - small enough for all the work to be done by one family.

Coffee growing in Tanzania is organised co-operatively. The co-operatives supply fertilisers and pesticides and give advice on cultivation.

When harvested, the coffee is collected from the village and taken to the Co-operative Union's works at Bukoba. There the beans are cleaned, graded and bagged, before being auctioned by the Tanganyika Coffee Board.

The co-operative provides these services by raising a nominal levy on each bag of coffee. But in return the peasants get a reliable service and are not exploited by intermediaries.

● Article by Alternative News Service, London, from research by Campaign Co-op, Uhuru, 35 Cowley Rd., Oxford (Tel: 0865-48249).

20 years of schooling and...

WHY IS IT that so many adults say "Stay on at school as long as you can"... "You won't get another chance"... "It's the best part of your life, you don't know how lucky you are" etc. etc?

This has always seemed a contradiction, when so many of the people I went to school with couldn't wait to get out of the place and grow up. But it begins to make sense when you reflect on your own experience in education.

In schools we are cocooned in an artificial environment, pressurised by compulsory attendance and the exam system (or its near relative, streaming). We are all being - and have been - conditioned to be subservient to authority of all kinds inside the classroom or lecture theatre which forms a microcosm of the whole society.

All the while the carrot of 'success' is dangled in front of us, teaching us to assess ourselves by totally alien standards. Those who are 'fortunate' enough to grab the carrot of academic achievement and finally make it into university will probably find the carrot is rotten and there the situation which the system has produced finally completes the process of destroying our ability to think and act creatively.

Ivan Illich, in his book 'Deschooling Society', explains how school is merely keeping people in a state of childhood. Without compulsory school restricted to a narrow age-range 'childhood' as it is thought of at present would no longer exist, but the process of growing and learning as a fully human activity would replace it and spread throughout life. The present split between an adult society which pretends to be human and 'realistic' and a school environment could no longer be maintained.

We all learn most of what we know outside school. Kids do the greater part of their learning without, or rather despite, teachers; learning to speak, think, love, feel, play, curse and work without the interference of 'teachers'.

Yet adults tend to romanticise their schooling, attributing their learning to the teacher whose patience they learned to admire. Schools create jobs for teachers, no matter what the pupils or students learn. Education absorbs vast amounts of money, to what end? Largely, it seems, to pressurise people and turn them into robots.

The school system from the age of five inculcates attitudes which support a materialistic, consumerist society, alienating everyone in work and leisure, splitting people and things into categories and imposing on us the system's own values. We are socialised into the roles required of us, learning our place and teaching us ways of looking at the system and ourselves, maintaining our

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dependence on the structures which will always take power and responsibility away from people and their right to run their own lives.

Learning institutions of all levels seek (and usually manage) to destroy our natural abilities of reason AND emotion to the problems which confront us in our everyday lives. This is because the problems which we are supposed to solve in schools are defined by the teacher and the curriculum, and because the real function of schooling is not learning, but adapting us to the system's demands.

Any educational institution is a small-scale model of the whole society, in which power is given to roles and people who 'know more', and people are differentiated and separated and rewarded according to external scales of value - external to themselves and their lives.

The higher up the system you go the more you are rewarded and the more you are manipulated by the process of selection and assessment, the more specialised your knowledge becomes and the difficulty of thinking for yourself becomes greater. In effect any attempt to really know what is going on in the world is virtually impossible.

THE TEACHER AND THE TAUGHT

At this point it's necessary to make something clear. We are not opposed to knowledge of anything, to mechanical engineering or maths or sociology, but to the system and structures within which such things are taught, which we see as being hopelessly alienating to the people inside them and damaging to the things taught since they cannot be used by all but act to separate the teacher and the taught, the 'learned' and the 'unlearned'. All we ask from you who are reading this is that you honestly ask yourself what the education system is doing - and has done - to you.

The response given to the question by the political parties of all persuasions has been purely quantitative and institutional. The left has always said that more facilities are needed without ever seemingly raising the question of what goes on within those buildings and between the teacher and the taught. The Right predictably have spewed forth on the need for more 'discipline' and

'parental choice' (but who would expect anything else?).

But in a strange way the Right understand very well what the present education system is all about. It's to do with providing the system with the docile human products it needs, and allowing only a tiny minority the privilege of real exploration in learning. To put it delicately, education of whatever variety is severely constrained by 'other requirements'. The broad public education industry is concerned in the last resort with economic and industrial needs, and even 'education for change' organised through political parties or alternative organisations is concerned with 'party' requirements.

While education about political issues or political change simply does not exist within the education industry (for sound 'economic' reasons on their part), within political organisations it has both a very low status and is fatally compromised by the need to educate, not for the fullest possible social and political understanding, but for inculcation of a party 'line'. In either context true 'free' and 'problematic' education cannot take place.

Education as it is organised at the moment cannot treat subjects or ideas as 'problems'. Education seems incapable of accepting that what it teaches is always problematic. It tries to fool us into believing that what it says is 'fact' - yet we all know that, particularly within the area of political and social issues, there is no single definable fact. What we require is an education available to us, under our own control, that recognises this.

We recognise that education is a subtle, two-way thing. That what we learn is modified, and can be contributed to, by what we know from our experiences. Conventional education, be it in a school or in a political group, hardly acknowledges this. A positive educational system would have to recognise this and would have to start from the qualities of experience we have as individuals.

This implies education beginning from what people actually feel and experience in their everyday lives, not from the idea that it is a 'good thing', that abstract idea A, B or C is

...they put you on the day shift

imposed upon a reluctant and hardly comprehending intelligence.

Education should be a discovery based on the exploration of the world through, and not in spite of, an individual's sense and experience of the world. The structure and patterns of conventional education, wholly destructive to this sense of exploration are in no way fitted for this task.

So far we've described the rotten-ness of the schooling process as we see it, its in-built destructive capability and its ideological content. So what? Well, it just so happens that a group of us in Liverpool are trying to set up a radical education network, trying to come to grips with the problems.

NATURAL DEVELOPMENT

We believe that the system is incapable of allowing the natural development of individuals' own abilities, of finding fulfilment and so we must attempt to make our own alternative - not to prop up the system but for ourselves as people, so that we have our own shock-proof crap detector. Education is so vital that it can't be left to any 'authority'. We must be able to ask the vital questions for ourselves.

So, working on the basis of Illich's work on learning exchanges and the idea of people constructing (and finding the means of doing) their own courses of study, we are planning and talking over the problems.

What's missing is people who want to help, and learn - because there is no separation. We also plan to do resource guides of what's available, where, and reading guides in various subject areas such as Marxism, planning, community arts etc.

In effect our aim is to try to create learning situations for people to develop their own thinking, feeling and knowledge. To end, even on a small scale, the counter-productive attitudes which the present system of mis-education spends so long cultivating, and which prevents the interchange of experience and knowledge and supports the elites hiding behind the 'mysteries' of science, both social and natural.

Your help is needed because without it nothing will change. Your need is what this system has produced. Anyway, Oscar Wilde said it first: "Education is certainly an admirable thing, but everyone knows that anything worth knowing can never be taught!"

Remember, let's have some knowledge for (a) change! -PAUL KELLY & BOB GAFFEY radical education network, 128c Sheil Road, Liverpool 6.