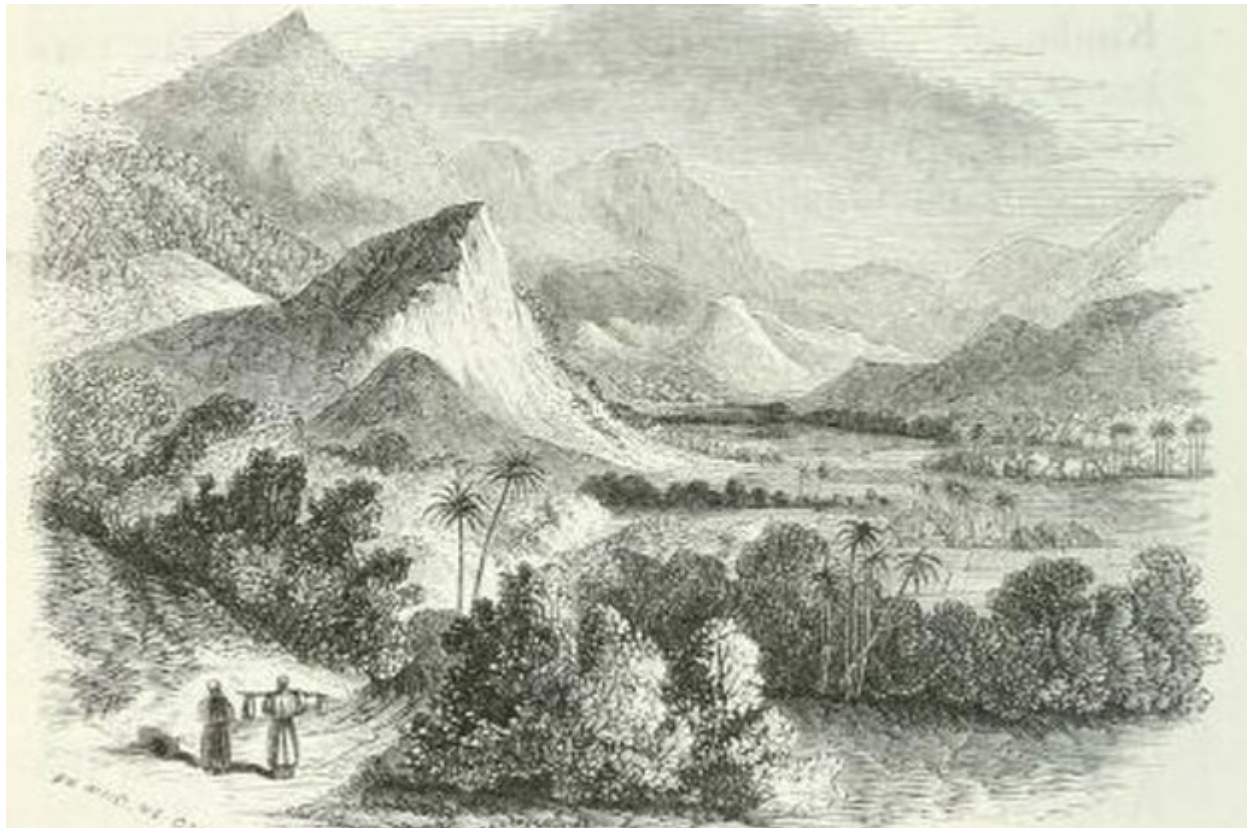


## The Dark Side Of Coffee

Posted on **November 21, 2014** by *ceciliaborjeson*

Similarly to many other commodities that make up the staples in Western households, coffee has a long and dark [history](#). One of the great paradoxes of the black brew is how it, in the West, gave rise to egalitarian places – coffeehouses – and was branded as a patriotic drink and an influencer of revolutions. Simultaneously, on the other side of the world, the very same coffee compounded the slave trade with the detention of African slaves, who were shipped across the ocean to the colonies under appalling circumstances. The topics of labour and exploitation have always been central to coffee production, and even though nearly 200 years have passed since slavery was abolished, its colonial past is still haunting coffee today, evident in the plight of farm workers. Additionally, coffee is historically pointed out as the main culprit behind the deforestation of rainforests to detrimental effect, which is accelerating the effects of climate change today. It's the dark side of coffee.

**...its colonial past is still haunting coffee today**



*Ceylon, one of the first coffee colonies*

### Ceylon – An early ecological lesson

The colonial system was founded on exploitation of human, as well as natural resources, and relied heavily on the use of slaves. For more than 300 years, until the abolition of slavery in 1888, people were lawfully sold and bought just like any commodity. Recognised as one of the first colonies for coffee cultivation, Ceylon would also prove an early example of when ecological forces come into play, ultimately resulting in its downfall. By the time the British conquered Ceylon from the Dutch, in 1796, coffee was already growing wild on the island. Large-scale cultivation was rolled out in 1824, whereby the British obtained the help of local villagers to penetrate the densely grown, untouched rainforest making way for coffee production using the slash-and-burn method. Once all the trees were cleared the attempt to turn the forest into plantations

began, however as all the protective vegetation had been destroyed the wind swept away the remaining, nutrient-poor soil. Additionally, by destroying the forest's eco-system large predators were driven away, which saw rats invading the plantations. In the late 1860, British Ceylon and Dutch Java were struck by coffee rust, a fungal infection which spread rapidly among coffee plantations and also to other coffee producing regions in Asia and Africa. By 1880 coffee production was completely abandoned in Ceylon, in favour of the rivalling beverage tea. The lessons learned in Ceylon paved way for some of the earliest scientific scholarship on the impact of coffee cultivation on the environment.



*Battle at Santo Domingo (Haiti), 1791*

## Bound by coffee

**The Caribbean** The Dutch were the first to use slaves for coffee cultivation in Ceylon in 1658, however as coffee seedlings were brought to the Caribbean and Haiti (then Santo Domingo) around 1720, it would take on the role as main supplier. By 1788 production was blooming and the territory (also comprising of Dominican Republic) supplied half of the world's coffee. The colony was the most profitable possession of the French Empire, and as such more than 800,000 slaves were imported from Africa to sustain the coffee and sugar production. The entry of Europeans into the Americas some hundreds years prior had already had catastrophic repercussions for the indigenous people, who suffered diseases, genocidal policies and coercive labour. The death rate in the Caribbean exceeded the birth rate, and the enslaved population was in decline due to being grossly overworked with insufficient nutrition, shelter, clothing and medical care. This ultimately fuelled the importation of more African-born slaves as their life-expectancy was deemed higher. They were kept under brutal conditions, constantly supervised and punished with the lash. At the point of being sold they were bundled up like sheep, washed and shaved for buyers to choose during a process, which included degrading measuring and physical examination. In Haiti this eventually propelled a slave rebellion culminating in the Haitian revolution in 1791, where the white Haitian minority of between 3000-5000 people were executed.





*Recently bought slaves waiting to be shipped to their landowners, 1830*

**Brazil** Coffee had been introduced to Brazil in 1727, however its cultivation would only gather momentum after its independence in 1822 – at the expense of human labour and the environment. With a social structure by and large centered around coffee, where the plantation owners and the banking system were enmeshed with one another, Brazil stands out as a beacon in history as the largest importer of slaves and the last nation to accept abolition of slavery. The planting class was opposed to abolition based on the firm belief that slavery was elemental for the continued existence of the country, and it would remain the backbone of the country's economy and in the first half of the 19th century alone. Brazil imported 1.5 million slaves to fill the demand for labour on the coffee plantations of the southeast, and many millions more would be detained and forcibly shipped to sustain the production of coffee. The slave trade would only halt in 1888 after British pressures and the Slavery Abolition Act passed in the British colonies 1833. By then 4 million slaves had been imported from Africa.

**...by then 4 million slaves had been imported**



*Deforestation in Brazil*

## **The life of a slave**

A life of a slave sometimes consisted of getting up 4 in the morning and working 18 hours a day suffering abysmal working conditions, to then be locked up at night together with the rest of the slaves. There were no weekends or rest days, and beatings and murders were commonplace and not subject to public scrutiny. Some accounts tell of rubbing a mixture of salt, pepper and vinegar in the wounds following whipping, and they also tell of the “codfish” which consisted of a whip secured to a water-driven wheel, which was used to lash slaves tied to a bench. Slaves were buried on plantations without death certificates, and children were often sold away from their parents. It was considered cheaper to import new slaves than to maintain the health of existing laborers, and as a result, slaves died after an average of seven years working on the coffee plantations. Following the banning of slave importation 1888 plantation owners tried alternative labour schemes, making way for the *colono system*, which saw a large number of European immigrants from Germany, Switzerland and Italy imported to Brazil. They were usually given a house, some land and a number of coffee trees to attend to, effectively binding them to the land until the transportation expenses of their immigration had been paid for. In the years to follow, Brazil flooded the world with coffee, which fuelled the deforestation of rainforest, clearing massive tracts to make way for coffee plantations. Brazil is to date the largest exporter of coffee in the world, having paid an irrevocable ecological price as more than 20% of the Amazon rainforest is gone forever. The issue of deforestation and threatened eco-systems is very much at the heart of the coffee debate today.

**... having paid an irrevocable ecological price**





*Child workers in Nicaragua*

## **Modern day – Forced labour and child labour**

As recent as 2003 Brazil was shaken by a scandal as authorities freed about 800 slave workers from a coffee farm in Bahia, thought to involve 25,000 victims. Modern day slave practices are real and do still exist in coffee-producing countries. It often consists of 'hiring' poor workers from a different region of the country – once at the coffee farm they are not paid, they barely have housing or food, and are prevented from returning to their homes, sometimes supervised by armed guards. Today's reality is that most of the world's 25 million coffee growers receive less than 1% of what most consumers pay for their daily cappuccino – and only about 6% of the price paid for coffee in the supermarket. But worst affected are the poorest rural people, the migrant workers who are most often plagued by a vicious circle of debt, poverty, illiteracy and starvation. According to Global Exchange, coffee workers are generally paid between \$2 and 3 dollars a day and Guatemalan workers must pick 100 pounds of coffee in order to get the minimum wage of just under \$3 a day. This means that workers are often forced to bring their children to the field to help them meet their quota. Migrant workers, especially in Central America, endure extreme conditions when living on the coffee farms with their families during harvest time, sometimes confined to sharing with 40-60 farmworkers (and their families). Mattresses and blankets are sparse and sanitation nearly non-existent, forcing the workers to use the coffee fields as toilets and shower in the rivers. Privacy, safety and security are absent. In 2011 the *U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB)* issued a report, concluding that child labour is used for the cultivation of coffee in Colombia, Guatemala and the Ivory Coast and *The International Labor Organization (ILO)* estimates that there are 250 million working children today, 120 million of whom work full time.

**... there are 250 million working children today**



*The status quo is affecting the workers the hardest*

## The status quo

Fast-forward to the present, although slavery eventually gave way to wage labour, the nature of traditional coffee trade is fundamentally flawed. It is a system that is generating wealth in wealthy countries, and worsening poverty in already poor countries, which is further compounded by social issues and the effects of climate change. As coffee chains today continue to spread like wildfire the coffee-producing countries are in a crisis, inextricably intertwined with their colonial legacy as well as the corporate present of status quo. Gary Goldstein of the *National Coffee Association*, representing the companies that make *Folgers*, *Maxwell House*, *Nescafe*, and other brands, infamously made a chilling remark that has resonated across the coffee industry, in support of the status quo:

***"This industry isn't responsible for what happens in a foreign country."***

Something has to change. Discerning consumers today are increasingly interested in knowing more about the working conditions of coffee workers, and seeing where their premiums invested go, which is a step in the right direction. However more transparency is needed in an increasingly consumer-driven market place where ethically minded consumers 'vote with their dollars'. It is time for change. [accordion title="Read more" close="1"]<http://cwh.ucsc.edu/brooks/coffee-site/1800-present.html> [http://www.organicconsumers.org/starbucks/0707\\_fair\\_trade.htm](http://www.organicconsumers.org/starbucks/0707_fair_trade.htm) <https://chocojavasocialjustice.wordpress.com/category/child-slave-labor-in-coffee-industry/> <http://dailycoffeenews.com/2013/07/17/farmworkers-left-behind-the-human-cost-of-coffee-production/> "Vassouras, a Brazilian Coffee County," 1850-1900, Stanley J Stein.[/accordion] *In our #throwbackcoffee series we take a closer look at coffee history and the seminal moments which have helped shaping coffee.*

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