

Caffeinated Memories:  
The Creation of Historical Narratives as Public Goods: Evidence  
from the Colombian Coffee Industry

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*Abstract*

We analyze how an organization that has the ability to shape a country's long-term economic and foreign policy develops a historical narrative to justify its power. We study the evolution of the Colombian Coffee Growers' Federation (FNCC) between 1927 and 2013 and show how this organization justified its enormous influence in Colombian policymaking by portraying itself as the sole generator of long-term political and economic stability. The FNCC was able to develop this narrative because it operated in a country with a weak political system and an undiversified economy, which was highly dependent on coffee exports. We argue that this narrative became a public good that was eventually appropriated by those challenging the FNCC's legitimacy. We make the case for the benefits of using the concept of public goods to account for the ways in which organizations create historical narratives about themselves to legitimize their operations vis-à-vis their country's society.

**Introduction**

Scholarship on management and organizations has recently demonstrated a revived interest in history and historiography (Wadhvani & Bucheli, 2014; Üsdiken & Kipping, 2014). As part of this historical turn, scholars have paid attention to the particular ways in which the past has been constructed or remembered, examining how organizations use rhetorical strategies, images, or symbols to create traditions or myths about their

foundation or long-term evolution. Scholars following this approach posit that these traditions and myths can be hidden behind a veil of objectivity (Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, and Wiebe, 2011; Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010; Popp & Holt, 2013; Suddaby, Foster, & Trank, 2010). Hobsbawm (2012a, b) and Anderson (1991) put forward a similar argument in their studies on the creation of nation-states. These two historians define nation-states as artificially created entities and argue that, as such, these entities need to develop strategies to generate a sense of belonging among their population. With this aim in mind, they maintain, the elites of nation-states develop myths and narratives about their past, their origin, and their identity, thus inventing traditions that build a sense of community. In this paper we combine these two strands of literature to understand strategies developed by organizations that create a narrative about themselves which is consistent with that of the nation-state and, in this way, legitimize their economic and political power in the eyes of the country's population. This phenomenon is particularly present in nation-states with economies that are dependent on one or two products controlled by a single entity.

We believe that this discussion about the connection between the narrative developed by an organization and its wider political and economic context (or "institutional environment" [Davis and North, 1971]) can be put in a fruitful dialogue with the concept of *public goods*. Although used mainly for economic analysis, this concept can provide us with a useful analytical lens to understand the circumstances in which other actors, even when challenging the organization's legitimacy, can appropriate the narrative that this organization has developed to legitimize its operations.

Public goods are defined as a subcategory of goods whose main characteristic is that "each individual's consumption of such a good, leads to no subtraction from any other individual's consumption (...) simultaneously for each and every (...) individual and each collective consumptive good" (Samuelson, 1954, p. 387). Milleron (1972) and Holcombe (1997) consider that Samuelson's definition implies the characteristics of non-excludability (once the public good is produced no consumer can be excluded from its consumption) and non-rivalry (a public good, once produced, can be consumed by other consumers with no additional costs). These characteristics are two important elements in our analysis. In this paper, we study how a historical narrative becomes a public good that can be used by social actors to favor agendas that are different from (or even in conflict with) those of the actor that originally created the narrative.

We maintain that an organization with a high degree of control over the economy can develop strategies to legitimize its operations by creating historical narratives about itself that are consistent with the historical narratives of the nation-state. This consistency

can be achieved through the development of a rhetoric that relies on the myths and symbols that most citizens of that nation-state accept and recognize as the ones that define their identity. In this process, the organization can redefine the sense of belonging to the nation through a narrative that includes its operations (and therefore, legitimizes them).

We argue that such an organizational strategy consisting of developing a historical narrative that uses the myths and symbols of the nation-state can become a public good. We posit this because of the following characteristics of public goods. First, by their very nature, narratives are intangible, and their consumption by one actor does not preclude their consumption by another one. Second, when a narrative is created around the foundational myths and “invented traditions” of the nation-state, the scope and legitimacy of that narrative is bounded by how that nation-state defines who belongs to that “imagined community” and who does not.<sup>1</sup> We maintain that despite this boundary condition, historical narratives developed by an organization that are consistent with those of the nation-state are not *club goods*, whose notion of membership is premised upon exclusionary mechanisms. Therefore, in the case of public goods, for someone to appropriate that narrative, it is sufficient that they feel a sense of belonging to the nation-state.

The consequence of this transformation of the narrative developed by the organization into a public good is that it can be appropriated by anyone who relates to the nation-state. Once the narrative is made available to everyone, the organization loses control over how it is used and some actors can make use of it to continue developing ideas about and perceptions of the nation-state. When the organization loses the ability to control how the narrative can be used, those appropriating that narrative can, at some point, use it to delegitimize the very organization that created it.

As a corollary, countries with a high degree of economic dependence on a particular export commodity tend to develop historical narratives that are centered on those commodities and that aim to drum up a sense of pride (López Alves, 2013). When this is the case, this organization will develop a historical narrative that seeks to legitimize its activities by linking the fate of the commodity to the fate of the nation state, and in turn links the fate of the commodity to the fate of the organization.

This paper studies the case of the coffee industry in Colombia between 1927 and 2013. Our focus on a non-OECD country makes especially relevant the literature that

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<sup>1</sup> Hobsbawm (2012a) contributed to the literature the concept of “invented traditions,” while “imagined communities” is a contribution of Anderson (1991).

examines how underdeveloped countries interpret and understand their past. As Nairn (1977) has pointed out, the specific characteristics of peripheral nations (that is, those nations not belonging to the “center,” which is composed of industrial powers) constrain them to develop a type of national identity in which national pride is premised on aspects other than economic success, powerful armies, technological innovation, and the like, because these elements are lacking. The intelligentsia is also aware of how their country’s lack of achievements and subordinate role in the global system both contribute to the shared sense of shame among citizens and hamper its possibilities of developing a positive narrative about its country. As a result, Nairn (1977) argues that this intelligentsia develops a historical narrative around the country’s resistance to the “materialism” of the center, while simultaneously crystallizing a romantic and sentimental sense of pride around domestic peculiarities such as folklore, natural bounty and so on.

Persistent poverty, however, makes it difficult for a country to sustain romantic and sentimental narratives in the long term. This is why Beckman (2013) argues that poor countries that are highly dependent on the export of one or two commodities develop narratives in which those exports represent the promise of future development (or what she calls “export reverie”). It is not clear when this prosperity will arrive, but the intelligentsia of nation-states with these characteristics needs to develop a narrative of hope and pride around the particular commodity in which its country has specialized for the global markets.

In the OECD world, nation-states have diversified economies with a large number of firms participating in them. This is not the case for many underdeveloped or emerging countries whose economies are highly dependent on one export-oriented product controlled by a small number of firms (often with strong links to the government). In these circumstances, we posit that when the organization controlling that sector of the economy develops a historical narrative about itself (as studied by Foster et al. [2011] and Suddaby, et al. [2010]) it has an incentive to make that narrative consistent with the broader narrative invented around the nation-state (Hobsbawm, 2012a, b; Anderson, 1991) which foments national pride on the basis of the export commodity and the promises (or dreams) of development associated to that commodity (Beckman, 2013; López-Alves, 2013). We posit that in the case of narratives created by organizations around national myths, the boundaries of appropriation of this narrative are the same ones as those of the nation-state. The more this narrative appeals to the whole nation-state, the more other actors (including those not directly related to the organization’s industry) will consider it legitimate to appropriate that narrative.

We apply the concept of “public goods” to the study of the historical narratives developed by a private organization controlling the exports and different segments of the value chain of a commodity in a country that is highly dependent on that commodity. We use the case of Colombia’s *Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia* (National Coffee Growers’ Federation hereafter FNCC) to show how an organization created a historical narrative that legitimized its disproportionate political and economic power. Throughout the twentieth century, the FNCC crafted a narrative about itself as the organization that had successfully created the national economy in Colombia after years of fragmentation and instability. We show that for decades the FNCC developed a narrative strategy by which it equated the evolution of its operations with that of the national economy and the fate of these operations with the country’s potential future prosperity. *Colombia es café* (“Colombia is coffee”) was a slogan that the organization used frequently with the aim of generating a sense of belonging throughout the whole country around the coffee industry. Over the course of the twentieth century, the FNCC used this perception to develop a rhetoric that justified its privileges at home and gave it leverage to negotiate abroad.

The effects of the FNCC were not solely rhetorical. After years of instability and bloody civil wars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the 1920s onward Colombia experienced unprecedented peace and economic stability fueled by coffee exports. Political violence emerged in the 1940s, but the coffee exports continued to account for a large part of the economy until the 1980s. From its inception in 1927, the FNCC gained an unprecedented degree of political and economic influence to such an extent, which allowed this organization to shape and define important aspects of Colombia’s fiscal, monetary, and foreign policy. No Colombian president could afford to ignore this organization and no major political or economic decision was made without consulting the FNCC. The FNCC also played a crucial role in the coffee-growing areas by becoming the main provider of public services such as infrastructure, education, and health. This paper shows how, for decades, the FNCC developed strategies to legitimize its enormous power by equating its operations, goals, dreams, and fate with those of the whole nation.

This paper uses both archival and secondary material. Our archival sources include the minutes and internal documents that the FNCC has kept and which are located in their central offices in Bogotá, Colombia. As these sources are not available to the public nor exist in electronic format, we were granted privileged access to them. These archives contain the details of the internal debates on the FNCC’s strategy starting 1927 (we use footnotes when citing these archives, as is commonly done in historical

studies). Another of the primary sources we consulted is the FNCC publication *Revista Cafetera*, a magazine that the organization produced and distributed among Colombian coffee farmers. This magazine defined the FNCC worldview and was a crucial means for the FNCC to shape a particular narrative of the industry among farmers. As the magazine is not available in electronic format, we consulted it at the FNCC archive in Bogotá and at the libraries of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Following Kipping, Wadhvani, and Bucheli (2014), Lipartito (2014), and Yates (2014), we read these sources in the context in which they were created and taking into consideration the agendas of those who created them. In the city of Bogotá, we interviewed Miguel Urrutia (former chairman of the Colombian Central Bank), Carlos Caballero (former member of the board of the Colombian Central Bank), and Marcela Ureña (senior economist at the FNCC). In the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia) we interviewed Eduardo Lora (senior member of a team created by the Colombian government to negotiate between coffee strikers and the FNCC in 2013).

This paper is organized in the following sections. The next (second) section shows the consolidation of Colombia as a coffee republic and the role that the FNCC played in this. The third section studies the narrative created by the FNCC and examines how it became a public good. The fourth section shows the appropriation of this public good by groups dissenting from the FNCC. The fifth section concludes the paper.

### **The Birth of a Coffee Nation: The FNCC, the Colombian state, and world markets**

In this section we provide a broad overview of the evolution of the Colombian coffee industry during the twentieth century, we highlight the role that the FNCC played in that evolution, and we discuss the importance of coffee for the Colombian economy. By showing the interplay between these three aspects, the section explains the importance of the FNCC in twentieth-century Colombia. The section provides the necessary information for the analysis of the FNCC's rhetorical strategies that we develop in the following sections.

The history of twentieth-century Colombia is marked by the overwhelming importance of coffee in the national economy. Before the consolidation of coffee as the country's main export in the late 1910s, Colombia had undergone periods of high political instability, its economy had been dominated by boom-and-bust cycles of export commodities, and the country was characterized by its limited integration due to an extremely poor internal infrastructure and a particularly challenging geography resulting from the country's particular topography (Ocampo, 1987). As a result, the country was

described as an “archipelago” of independent economies which had stronger relations with foreign markets than between each other (Nieto Arteta, 1971). Following a bloody civil war (1899-1903) Colombia’s rulers organized the country around a highly centralized state, opened doors to foreign investment, and supported the development of commodities exports (Safford & Palacios, 2002).

The coffee industry’s characteristics fit perfectly within the agenda developed by the Colombian elite throughout the twentieth century. First, by the 1910s a consolidated global coffee market already existed, with Europe and the United States consuming most coffee exports (Topik & Samper, 2006). Not only had US consumption increased during the nineteenth century at a staggering rate of 2,600 per cent, but the US government helped by decreasing tariffs on this commodity that showed little price elasticity (Topik, 2003). Second, Colombia had already begun to produce coffee in the late nineteenth century, and its quality proved to be higher than Brazil’s then, the world’s largest producer (Palacios, 2002). And, third, coffee did not require major investments in technology or infrastructure. Labor costs were low, and it could be produced on small farms and transported by mule to the towns where it was dried and stored (Nieto Arteta, 1971).

Colombian coffee production concentrated in the Western Andean slopes of the departments of Antioquia, Quindío, and Caldas, which are geographically separated from the capital city of Bogotá.<sup>2</sup> Despite Colombia’s strongly centralized political system, its variegated geography, and the terrible infrastructure that communicated different parts of the country with each other, the coffee regions (particularly Antioquia and its capital city of Medellín) achieved high economic relevance due to the growing importance of coffee exports (Ocampo, 1987). Between the 1930s and the early twenty-first century, most of the influential policymakers and businessmen in Colombia originated from the coffee-producing areas rather than from Bogotá (Caballero, 2015). This started a decades-long period in which the national economic policy disproportionately favored the coffee-producing regions of Colombia (Calvo and Meisel, 1999).

The FNCC was established in 1927 by a group of coffee exporters (or the “coffee bourgeoisie”) in the midst of a dramatic fall in international coffee prices. In order to deal with the crisis, the coffee exporters decided that they needed an entity to defend the sector, oversee the application of legal provisions affecting the industry, champion cost-reducing measures, improve internal transportation, and promote and market Colombian coffee abroad (Junguito and Pizano, 1997). By that time, coffee exports represented

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<sup>2</sup> Since the nineteenth century, the political subunits in Colombia are known as departments.

around sixty percent of total exports (GRECO, 2002).

With the growth of coffee exports, the FNCC and the Colombian government developed a symbiotic relationship. In 1931, facing the challenges of the global Great Depression, the FNCC pressured the government and the Central Bank to abandon the gold standard in order to give monetary authorities more room to devalue the currency and increase export income for the coffee industry. Soon afterwards, Colombia abandoned the gold standard and devalued the currency by 10 per cent, in a measure that the FNCC celebrated (Bucheli and Sáenz, 2014). That year, the FNCC was also given a permanent seat on the Central Bank's board of directors (established in 1923) (Fedesarrollo, 1978).

Resulting from this special relationship, in 1931, the FNCC convinced the government to create an agrarian bank (Caja Agraria) that would provide favorable loans to the agrarian sector (mostly benefitting the coffee industry) and to subsidize 40 per cent of the debt that coffee exporters contracted with the country's main rural mortgage bank. This made it possible for the coffee industry to survive the 1930s with very low levels of debt, while the Caja Agraria was maintained through cash emission from the Central Bank until the 1940s (Cuéllar, 2004). The creation of the Caja Agraria had been proposed by Mariano Ospina Pérez, the congressman for Antioquia who was, at the time, the CEO of the FNCC and later sat on the Caja Agraria's board representing the FNCC (authors' interview with Carlos Caballero, Bogotá, October 5 2016). (Mariano Ospina Pérez was eventually elected president of Colombia for the 1946-1950 presidential term). Later, in 1933, the government established multiple exchange rates to protect the coffee sector (authors' interview with Carlos Caballero, Bogotá, October 6, 2015). Multiple exchange rates meant different values of the Colombian peso with respect to other currencies depending on the function of particular transactions.

The FNCC obtained another important tax benefit in 1940. That year, the government established the National Coffee Fund, financed by the taxes that had been paid by the coffee industry and that had to be spent in the coffee sector. This fund was used to stabilize the internal purchase prices of the coffee that the FNCC bought from individual farmers and to finance warehouses (Palacios, 2002). This meant that, in addition to the existing tax benefits and subsidies, the taxes paid by the coffee industry were to be reinvested in the coffee industry.

The FNCC's influence on Colombia's foreign policy once again became apparent after the start of World War II. Concerned about how the closure of European markets would affect Latin America's political stability, the U.S. called for a conference, after which the Inter-American Coffee Agreement was signed. This agreement guaranteed

Colombia a quota of 10 per cent, measured in tons, of all the Latin American coffee exported to the United States (with Brazil obtaining 67 per cent; Inter-American Coffee Agreement, 1941). Originally, the Colombian government was going to send a delegate for the negotiations, but the FNCC firmly opposed this, demanding to be the sole negotiator and eventually achieving this aspiration.<sup>3</sup> To comply with a final clause of the Inter-American Coffee Agreement that involved storing large quantities of coffee produced in excess of the Colombian quota, the Colombian government subsidized warehouses as a measure to store coffee and stabilize the purchase price offered to the coffee growers through the National Coffee Fund (Junguito & Pizano, 1997).

The Cold War subsequently guaranteed a market for coffee producers. Concerned about the potential for rural, Communist-inspired revolts, the U.S. and the coffee-producing countries (from Latin America and elsewhere) signed a new deal known as the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) in 1962 (Lanzetta, 1991). When a renegotiation of this agreement took place in 1977, the FNCC again demanded that the Colombian government fire government representatives and leave the negotiations completely in the hands of the FNCC (authors' interview with Carlos Caballero, Bogotá, October 5 2015). The Colombian government quickly complied. With a guaranteed US market, the FNCC focused on promoting the *Café de Colombia* brand articulated around the image the fictitious character of Juan Valdez, created in 1960 (see Figure 1). The ICA was eventually dismantled in 1989.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

Between the 1940s and 1980s, the resources provided by the National Coffee Fund allowed the FNCC to invest in areas directly related to the global coffee value-chain, including a merchant fleet, fertilizer manufacturers, port management firms, warehouses, a railway firm, and international coffee marketing firms. Investments included firms in industries indirectly linked to the global coffee value-chain such as the Banco Cafetero (one of Colombia's major banks and the only firm in which the National Coffee Fund had 100 per cent ownership), a mortgage bank, an agrarian bank, an insurance company, and seven regional investment banks. These institutions were all major players in the Colombian financial sector. Additionally, the organization owned shares in several forestry firms, sugar mills, and fruit companies. Several of the major firms in which the

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<sup>3</sup> FNCC, Congreso Nacional Cafetero, Acta No. 1 (Secret Session), November 25 1940; Acta No. 3, November 3, 1940. FNCC Archive.

organization was a major investor, were in turn major investors in other ventures such as a major domestic passenger airline and other minor financial institutions. By the early 1990s, the conglomerate built around the FNCC was one of the major business groups in the Colombian economy (García Molina, 2010). In figure 2, we display the Colombian global coffee value chain, which shows the importance of having control over activities such as warehousing or shipping.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE]

In Table 1 we display the weight of coffee exports relative to Colombian exports of goods for the period between 1908 and 1999. As is clearly shown, during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, Colombia was highly dependent on coffee exports. However, the predominance of coffee gradually diminished because manufacturing and other commodities accounted for a larger share of the national economy.

In sum, between the 1920s and 1980s, the FNCC acquired an ever-growing influence in the Colombian economy as well as in economic and foreign policy decision-making institutions. As a result, the FNCC had the power to influence or shape important segments of the Colombian institutional environment. In the following sections, we study the rhetorical strategies developed by the FNCC to justify its influence, we outline how the narrative created around that rhetoric became a public good and how this narrative was eventually appropriated by other actors including those who challenged the FNCC.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

### **“Colombia is Coffee:” The Creation of a Historical Narrative as a Public Good**

During most of its history, the FNCC developed a historical narrative about itself that is consistent with a series of myths and images that were both national and regional. The FNCC’s historical narrative can be read through multiple lenses: the strategies developed by the elites of peripheral countries to promote nationalism (Nairn, 1977; also consistent with the invention of traditions as characterized by Hobsbawm [2012a, b] and Anderson [1991]); the narratives centered on the promises of development inscribed in commodities (or “export reverie”; Beckman, 2013); the nationalist narratives woven around a particular commodity (López-Alves, 2013), and the tendency on the part of organizations to associate their particular narratives with those broadly accepted by society (Foster et al., 2011; Suddaby, et al., 2010). The fact that the narrative developed

by the FNCC intentionally appealed to the widest segment of the population beyond those directly involved in the coffee industry made this narrative non-exclusionary within the Colombian nation-state and, therefore, it could be appropriated by those identified as members of the Colombian nation. The legitimacy of this appropriation depended on the degree of separation from the coffee industry and the narratives created around it. Considering that the FNCC repeatedly sought to connect coffee with Colombia as a whole, the element limiting who could appropriate that narrative was to be found within the definition of the Colombian nation-state.

Since its inception, the FNCC created a narrative through which it linked its failure or success with that of the nation. In the development of this narrative, the image FNCC promoted about itself from its early years was consistent with long-held views of the coffee industry. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Colombian intelligentsia praised coffee as a product that could lift Colombia out of the long period of political and economic instability that had followed Independence from Spain in the 1830s (Bergquist, 1978). The rise of the coffee industry in the 1910s and 1920s did indeed put an end a long period characterized by booms and busts of different commodities. It also unified the Colombian economy, brought about economic stability, and coincided with the longest period in Colombian history of relative peace and political stability (which lasted until the late 1940s) (Bushnell, 1993). In fact, the idea that coffee was a key factor in the creation of a national economy has also been espoused by influential economic historians (Ocampo, 1987; Nieto Arteta, 1971). A reading of the FNCC's foundational documents, written in 1927, reveals how its founders appealed to the historical role of coffee by portraying this industry as inaugurating a break with a previously chaotic history and ushering a period of economic stability and peace.<sup>4</sup>

### *Coffee, stability, and democracy*

One of the avenues through which the FNCC promoted a particular narrative about itself was its publication *Revista Cafetera*. This publication was distributed widely in the coffee-producing regions. These areas had relatively high levels of literacy and the *Revista Cafetera* reached places where no national or local newspapers were available. This periodical kept the coffee growers updated about the national and international coffee economy as well as highlighted the FNCC's achievements in the form of social

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<sup>4</sup> FNCC, Comité Nacional, Actas, Acuerdos y Resoluciones, 1927-1928, Session of August 11 of 1927, FNCC Archive.

spending on healthcare, infrastructure, and education, in addition to facilitating technical information to improve production. Given these characteristics, the *Revista Cafetera* provides us with a fascinating window to explore the worldview that the FNCC wanted to instill among the coffee growers.

A very telling address in which the FNCC's president justifies the special relationship between the coffee sector and the Central Bank is worth citing in its entirety:

I am fiscal equilibrium, because customs revenues, which are the axis of our budgets, depend on coffee exports: I am the external credit of the nation and the departments, because the external debts, both public and private, are serviced with the exchange from coffee; I am the Central Bank, because if coffee exports ceased at a given moment, the Central Bank would go bankrupt in less than three months; I represent and sustain the sound monetary system based on the gold standard, the stability of exchange, the possibility of introducing into the country machinery, rails, scientific books, foreign professors, in a word, the civilization of Colombia from the material point of view. (*Revista Cafetera*, (January 1931: 771. Also cited in Drake [1989: 61]).

It is worth remembering that 1931 was the year in which the FNCC earned a seat on the Colombian Central Bank and also the year in which the foreign exchange policy started to be determined by whatever benefitted the coffee industry.

The FNCC has a unique governance structure that is central to the organization's motives for developing an inclusive narrative. At the top of the FNCC's structure is the powerful *Congreso Cafetero*, a body composed of 90 people elected as representatives of the Departmental Coffee Committees (representing the different coffee-producing Colombian departments). Figure 3 shows the composition of the FNCC's 16-person board, including a representative of each of the 15 Departmental Coffee Committees and the firm's CEO (interview with Marcela Ureña, senior economist at FNCC, Bogotá, June 10, 2014). The Departmental Coffee Committees come next in the hierarchy, each of them composed of six individuals. At a lower level, the organization has the Municipal Coffee Committees, also composed of six individuals who oversee operations at the municipal level. What makes the FNCC unique is that the base of its hierarchical pyramid is composed of *cafeteros cedulados*, independent coffee farmers who obtain membership in the organization as coffee suppliers and who elect the members of the Departmental and Municipal committees. This membership gives the coffee growers privileged access to technical assistance and credit among other benefits, but does not preclude non-

*cedulado* coffee growers and other members of Colombian society from consuming the public goods offered by the FNCC, such as roads, infrastructure, branding, and of course, from adopting the historical narratives around coffee and the nation-state. As we posit in this study, the scope of these particular historical narratives was not bound by formal memberships to the organization.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ROUND HERE]

While the rhetoric that the FNCC developed was strongly tied to the myths around the coffee-growing regions, it was intended for the country as a whole. The FNCC appealed to its very particular organizational structure to develop its inclusionary narrative that covered both those working directly in the coffee industry as well as the rest of Colombian citizens. The FNCC has traditionally highlighted its governance structure as evidence of how democratic the industry and the organization are. In fact, FNCC literature uses the word “democracy” to describe the organization’s corporate structure (Reina, et al., 2007: 103). It emphasizes how, as an organization, the FNCC “empowers” individuals even when they are not employees of the organization. The *Revista Cafetera* made efforts to propagate this idea among the coffee growers in articles that portrayed the FNCC romantically as having been “democratic” from its early days due to its “cooperativist” structure and its social spending that benefitted small holders (*Revista Cafetera*, 1975). In this way, the FNCC legitimized its operations and decisions by portraying them as the result of a consultative and collective process that included the celebrated coffee farmers.

The image of the coffee region as being more “democratic” and egalitarian than the rest of Colombia is consistent with the portrayal of the region in classic studies (López, 1927; Parsons, 1968) and, while it has consistently been promoted by the *antioqueño* intelligentsia (Mayor, 1984), other scholars have challenged this image (Arango, 1982; Palacios, 2002). Nevertheless, it shows an effort on the part of the FNCC to equate its values with those of the nation and to generate a sense of loyalty among farmers that was similar to the loyalty they felt towards the nation-state. The organization did not aim to include only the *cafeteros cedulados*, but also those who worked for the industry but were not official members, people living in coffee-growing areas, and the inhabitants of the rest of the country.

In 1932, the FNCC conducted the first “coffee census,” an initiative aimed at providing the organization with accurate information about population and general socio-economic characteristics of the coffee-growing regions. Highlighting their finding that

most coffee growers were small farm owners, the analysis of land ownership concluded that this “truly unexpected data shows how the coffee industry is not only the fundamental and decisive factor of our national economy, but at the same time is also an admirable element of social equilibrium. Given the very nature of its organization and its exceptionally favorable circumstance of providing adequate and almost permanent labor to women and children, it achieves property division in and of itself, in an automatic fashion, without the need for laws or expropriations” (cited in Farnsworth-Alvear, Palacios, and Gómez-López, 2017: 484).

The particular governance structure of the FNCC and the narrative the organization developed around this structure had tangible results. In 1937, the Colombian government attempted to gain control of some of the FNCC’s operations. The FNCC strongly opposed the government’s initiatives and mobilized peasants to demonstrate against them (Bates, 1997; authors’ interview with Carlos Caballero, Bogotá, October 5 2016).

The FNCC’s narrative around stability and democracy was also beneficial for the organization during the International Coffee Agreement negotiations, where it was Colombia’s negotiator. In that context, it brought back the argument that coffee exports kept Colombia from falling into political and economic chaos, and that they prevented the seeds of an eventual a Communist revolution from being sown (authors’ interview with Eduardo Lora, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, October 16 2015) (the stability argument was the same one used in negotiating the Inter-American Coffee Agreement during World War II).

In the following decades, the FNCC developed a successful motto that it disseminated in its promotional literature, which prominently displayed the sentence “*Colombia es café*” (“Colombia is coffee”). *Colombia es café* was also used in Colombian magazine and newspaper ads promoting the FNCC, and in the *Revista Cafetera*. An article in the latter quotes the words of the nineteenth-century liberal politician and intellectual Rafael Uribe Uribe: “in Colombia everyone is a coffee grower until the contrary is proven” (*Revista Cafetera*, 1947: 3). The FNCC’s strategy connected its own activities to the very existence of Colombia as a nation-state, and portrayed these activities as a precondition for the latter. In this way, the FNCC was developing a narrative around its operations that fit with the one the country’s intelligentsia had previously promoted for the nation as a whole.

*Linking the organization’s narrative to national myths: Juan Valdez’s values*

The FNCC took advantage of and promoted a particular myth existing in Colombia about the coffee-producing regions to create a non-exclusive narrative. Not only did it appropriate this myth, it even used it in depicting the lives and decisions of the members of the FNCC leadership. We show how the FNCC equated national and regional traditions with its own and promoted national pride around coffee by linking the fate of the organization to the fate of the nation. In this way, national pride was built around an export commodity (as studied by Beckman [2013] and López-Alves [2013]) controlled by a particular organization. Foster et al. (2011) posit that organizations create a tradition by establishing a particular culture that crystallized in symbols, important dates, and “heroes.” In this section we show how the FNCC manufactured this type of tradition by appealing to the symbols, myths, and heroes related to the Colombian nation-state. In this way, the organization could generate a type of pride whose reach extended beyond those who worked directly for the organization and included other citizens of the country. Through this strategy, the organization was using the specifically non-exclusive character of the narrative to create a public good. We show that the type of culture the FNCC promoted has centered around production rather than consumption, as it was shaped by the role of Colombia in the world markets as a coffee producer and the importance of coffee farmers in the value-chain.

The coffee-growing areas (particularly Antioquia) have traditionally played an important role in the Colombian imaginary. Since the nineteenth century, the stereotypical image of *antioqueños* portrays them as natural-born entrepreneurs whose work ethic, ambition, and risk-taking attitude stands in contrast to the stereotype attributed domestically to the rest of Colombians as timid and risk-averse (Dávila, 2012). This stereotype was reinforced in the twentieth century due to Antioquia’s role as the country’s economic engine, given the region’s importance in Colombia’s coffee exports and the presence of manufacturing industry in its capital city of Medellín.

Speculations (often promoted by the *antioqueño* intelligentsia itself) abound in the quest to explain this region’s relative prosperity; these appeal to ethnic factors (unproven Jewish Sephardic or Basque origins; Twinam, 1982), the strong work ethic and independent spirit developed by families who had conquered nature and indigenous people in order to establish independent farms (Twinam, 1982; Parsons, 1968), the *antioqueños* desire to gain status in an unequal society (Hagen, 1963), and their openness to adopting “practical” instead of humanistic knowledge (Safford, 1976). In fact, a highly influential work on Colombian economic history concludes that Colombia succeeded at creating a modern economy in the 1920s because the coffee-linked *antioqueños* had “decided so” (McGreevey, 1975, pp. 308) –an interpretation challenged

by other historians (see, Echavarría & Villamizar, 2007).

The *antioqueño* elite has not been shy about celebrating this stereotype. Biographies of the main entrepreneurs who had founded or led the FNCC explicitly celebrate their *antioqueño* roots, their childhood spent on coffee farms, their humble origins, and the work ethic ingrained in them since their early years by austere and entrepreneurial hardworking fathers and pious Catholic mothers (Mayor, 1984). For a country that had long been ruled by a Bogotá elite that despised manual labor, discouraged social mobility, and was more interested in European high culture than in business, the celebration of pragmatic entrepreneurs who embraced rural work broke with existing traditions (Nieto Arteta, 1971; Mayor, 1984).

Two examples illustrate this narrative around identity and values. Biographers of Mariano Ospina Pérez, founder and first president of the FNCC, conservative congressman for Antioquia (1922-1926), and president of Colombia (1946-1950), strongly highlight his non-aristocratic origins, the fact that his father was a self-made man, the work ethic his father instilled in him and his many siblings at early age on the coffee farm, and the influence of his mother's strong Catholic faith (see Mayor [1984] and Bergquist [1978]). Rafael Uribe Uribe, a liberal general who in the late nineteenth century promoted the wide-scale cultivation of coffee across Colombia, was also portrayed by his biographers as an austere and pragmatic individual, always more concerned with the long-term economic growth and political stability of his country than with the arts and poetry (the latter of which had been a key sign of prestige among members of the Bogotá elite; Nieto Arteta, 1971; Bergquist, 1978). The promotion of this image rippled beyond academic studies. Articles in the *Revista Cafetera* published biographies of the FNCC founders that portrayed them as practical, forward-looking, austere men who travelled by foot around the coffee region, worked alongside the coffee growers, or grew up on coffee farms (Chalarca, 1975a, b; Ospina, 1976; Pastrana, 1997). This strategy appealed to coffee growers, seeking to foster in them a sense of identification with the FNCC leadership and the organization as a whole (Rodríguez, 1997).

In 1989, the FNCC published a two-volume biography of the organization's CEO Manuel Mejía (who held that position between 1937 and 1957). The first volume attributes his negotiation skills, work ethic, and patriotism to his *antioqueño* upbringing (Morales Benítez, 1999). In short, the FNCC linked its own evolution to that of the personal life and individual traits of its leaders, which brought into play a particular stereotype about the people of the coffee-growing regions. Information unearthed from our archival research in the FNCC's internal documents shows how, between the late

1920s and early 1930s, this organization developed some initiatives that aimed to generate loyalty among coffee farmers in the lines of those defined by Foster et al. (2011). These initiatives included the creation of the *Revista Cafetera*, the composition and adoption of a “Coffee Anthem” to be taught and sung in regional schools, the establishment of the *Día del Café* (the Day of Coffee), the organization of the Coffee Beauty Pageant in which young women from the coffee region would compete, and the publication of different types of reading material, including the *Revista Cafetera* and the popular comic *The Adventures of Professor Yarumo* in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, a large themed amusement park, known as the Coffee Park, exists in the coffee region to celebrate its “coffee heritage.” Contrary to other elites in Latin America, who celebrated cultural refinement, the *antioqueño* elite celebrates its far humbler farmer roots (Appelbaum, 1999).

The creation of the iconic figure of Juan Valdez in 1960 is part of this celebration of the coffee farmer. It is telling that Juan Valdez does not represent a traditional Latin American peasant working for a large landowner. Rather, he emblemizes the small independent entrepreneurial farmer. The fact that Juan Valdez has no indigenous or African ancestors is not coincidental, because Colombian coffee farmers are located in areas that are traditionally viewed as having a higher proportion of “white” population in the country (Appelbaum, 1999). The “whiteness” of Antioquia (and that of its coffee farmers in particular) has traditionally been celebrated and highlighted by the region’s intelligentsia, despite the high presence in the region of indigenous peoples and descendants of African slaves (Wade, 1995).

While the character of Juan Valdez was central to the global marketing of Colombian coffee, Juan Valdez also came to brand Colombia more broadly (Molleda & Roberts, 2008). For a country with a reputation tainted by its association with cocaine trafficking, the image of an honest, hardworking, humble individual offered a means of promoting pride among coffee growers and Colombians in general (Reina, et al., 2007). Juan Valdez was re-launched in the early 2000s when the FNCC promoted an international chain of coffee shops bearing the same name. The FNCC’s studies not only showed that Juan Valdez attained high levels of international recognition (comparable to the levels of Nike or Starbucks), they observed that the brand was also perceived positively within Colombia (Reina, et al., 2007). In 2006, when the time to hire a new actor to represent Juan Valdez came, the FNCC did not hire a professional, but held a wide casting among coffee growers, eventually hiring one of them (Reina, et al., 2007).

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<sup>5</sup> FNCC, Comité Nacional: Actas, Acuerdos y Resoluciones (1927-1928). Various meetings.

In the official announcement, the FNCC said that Juan Valdez “reflects the nature, values, vision, honesty, and democratic vocation of the Colombian coffee growers” (Molleda & Roberts, 2008: 167).

The FNCC portrayed the defense of the coffee industry as a quasi-patriotic duty. During the 1970s, the FNCC embarked on an expensive campaign to protect Colombian coffee trees from a disease known as “coffee rust” or *roya*. Billboards located in strategic locations (such as airports or highways) and television ads repeatedly emphasized the message “*Colombia sin roya: un propósito nacional*” (“A Colombia with no roya: a national goal”). These messages summoned the whole Colombian population to defend the industry, depicting this as a patriotic duty that involved everyone in the fate of coffee.

The gradual transformation of this narrative, which projected the FNCC’s concerns upon the entire population, into a public good is illustrated by its adoption beyond the confines of the FNCC. In the early 1990s, Colombia became a major producer and exporter of soap operas, one of the most successful of which was called *Café: con aroma de mujer* (Coffee: with the scent of a woman) (Medina and Barrón, 2010). This show follows the life of a woman who starts out as a coffee grower on a farm and climbs the ladder of the coffee industry to eventually become a major negotiator for Colombian coffee in international organizations. In her process of social mobility, the protagonist works in all segments of the coffee value chain, and the soap opera shows her challenges at dealing with an increasingly large conglomerate (Pardo, 1996). *Café* was a global success, shown in 77 countries and dubbed to several languages, becoming one of the main ways through which international audiences learned about Colombian society (Lozano and Mendoza, 2010).

The sports industry is also a site in which strategies are deployed that identify Colombia with coffee on a global scale. In the early 1980s, an underdog Colombian cycling team made headlines because of its surprisingly good performance in the Tour de France. The team was sponsored by the FNCC and all the sportsmen wore a jersey which prominently displayed the Juan Valdez logo and the phrase *Café de Colombia*. The FNCC-sponsored Colombian cycling federation promoted the use of the nickname *los cafeteros* for this team (a nickname adopted by the European sports media) even though most cycling racers did not come from coffee-growing regions (Dussán and Vergara, 2010). Later on, for the 2018 World Cup, held in Russia, the Colombian Football Federation designed a jersey for its national team that emulated the type of *poncho* traditionally worn by coffee growers and whose design was similar to that used by Juan Valdez; it is also worth noting that in the international sports media the Colombian national football team is nicknamed *los cafeteros* (“La nueva camiseta,” 2018). For

emerging and underdeveloped countries, these examples are not trivial, as their national pride is often linked to the international success and recognition of domestic sportspeople or entertainers. This echoes Nairn's (1977) interpretation of national pride in peripheral societies.

The FNCC's initiatives to manufacture a coffee culture attest to the organization's desire to define as its own the type of culture existing in the coffee-growing regions, or to portray itself as the representative of the people living in those areas. As long as the FNCC gained economic power, it invested in areas that typically fell within the purview of the state, such as schools, social programs, or infrastructure (Arango, 1982; Palacios, 2002), and prominently displayed these initiatives in the *Revista Cafetera*. This means that the coffee farmers' loyalty was not based exclusively on a shared culture, but also on the material benefits derived from conducting businesses with the FNCC. The FNCC made considerable efforts to include other actors within Colombian society as part of the narrative it promoted. This strategy could backfire once those other actors adopted this narrative as their own particularly when challenging the FNCC. We study this process in the following section.

### **Challenges to the Legitimacy of the Creator of the Narrative: Colombia is Coffee... But not the FNCC**

We argue that the narrative promoted by the FNCC to legitimize its position in the Colombian economy and political system became a public good and that, as such, it was liable of being appropriated by other groups. In this section, we show how different groups used the FNCC's narrative to challenge this organization particularly in instances in which they believed the FNCC was not behaving in accordance with that narrative.

#### *Colombia (is) no longer coffee: the post-1989 world*

During the 1980s and 1990s, Colombia and the global coffee economy experienced dramatic changes that affected the FNCC's operations. First, in 1989, the International Coffee Agreement came to an end after the United States lost interest in keeping this Cold War institution afloat (Engler, 2015). Second, in the late 1980s, a new wave of free-market oriented technocrats assumed influential positions in the Colombian government, some of them with little or no connection to the coffee sector. Third, the importance of coffee exports in the national economy decreased relative to manufacturing and other commodity exports (not necessarily from the traditional coffee regions). Fourth, a series

of bankruptcies led to the disappearance of some of the most important financial and transportation corporations belonging to the FNCC conglomerate, leading influential policymakers to believe that this organization had reached its point of exhaustion (“El ocaso del grupo cafetero,” 2013). Fifth, the newly created illegal cocaine trafficking industry destabilized the coffee regions and destroyed the regions’ social fabric, turning the previously prosperous and stable Medellín into the world’s most dangerous city and creating the conditions for cocaine drug lords to become into some of Colombia’s most influential political actors (Inter-American Development Bank, 2015). And, sixth, in 1991 Colombia adopted a new Constitution which wrested from the FNCC their representative’s seat on the board of the Central Bank, while the government continued to have a representative on the FNCC’s board (authors’ interview with Miguel Urrutia, Bogotá, October 5, 2015).

This series of events forced the FNCC to adopt desperate measures in the quest to ensure its survival. Its main strategy was to bring the Colombian government on board in an attempt to, in any and every way possible, negotiate a new quota agreement with both consumer and producing countries. In spite of the Colombian president’s direct involvement in negotiations with his American and Brazilian counterparts, efforts to revive a quota agreement failed tremendously (“El fin del pacto cafetero,” 2013). After 10 years of efforts in the early twenty-first century, both the FNCC and the Colombian government realized that it was impossible to reach a new quota agreement. In the interim, subsidies paid for with loans from multilateral institutions kept flowing to the coffee sector to maintain the domestic price paid to coffee growers (Cuéllar, 2004).

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Colombian coffee industry faced its most serious challenges in history. The end of the International Coffee Agreement led to a drop of more than 50 per cent in the price of coffee with respect to 1989, the size of the *Grupo Cafetero* had been reduced due to previous bankruptcies in the 1980s and 1990s, and its weight in government institutions had decreased (Lopera, 1992). In addition, efforts to make the Juan Valdez brand competitive abroad foundered as most of the international Juan Valdez coffee houses showed dismal financial results (“De la bonanza a la crisis,” 2013). This situation brought on a crisis in the way in which the FNCC related to the rest of the society.

Despite changing global conditions and the country’s new orientation towards market-oriented reforms in terms of economic policy, the government showed its support for the FNCC’s operations during the first post-ICA years. In a telling speech to the FNCC, César Gaviria, the newly elected president (and a champion of liberal market reforms), explicitly resorted to this organization’s narrative. In his speech Gaviria said,

We are facing a challenge of historical proportions. We cannot disappoint our forebears who conquered the mountains by the force of their own axes. They who were wearing only their hat, poncho, and *carriel* [a personal bag widely used by coffee farmers] fought like decent free men against evil forces. (...) Those of us linked to coffee will continue to be attached to our land, working with the same honesty and generosity. That is the only way we will be able to conquer the path towards the great future we want to build for our children. Let's give our children a new opportunity" (Gaviria, 1992).

It is worth highlighting the fact that Gaviria drew upon the well-worn image of the pioneers conquering the mountains with their axes. This is clearly borrowed from a phrase used by Alejandro López (a 1920s *antioqueño* intellectual) in which he spoke of the "struggle between the axe and the official document," when studying (and celebrating) the *antioqueño* pioneers who conquered lands to open their family farms during the nineteenth century, and to confront larger (and in López's view "parasitical") landowners who used legal tricks in attempting to take over the farmers' hard-won land (López, 1927; Mayor, 1984). This image is also closely connected to what many articles in the *Revista Cafetera* reiterated for decades in statements such as "[Colombia] depends on the calloused hands of coffee growers. Where do all the resources for the manufacturing industry come from? How do we pay for the imported components of our car industry? (...) We owe that to all of those sweaty coffee growers who work in the Colombian mountains with their calloused hands" (López Michelsen, 1978: 68).

The context of Gaviria's message is crucial to understanding his use of the FNCC's narrative. The speech did not aim to defend the FNCC's privileges, but to announce to the organization that it would not be able to continue to count on state support in the coming years and that the FNCC needed the skills acquired over decades to compete in the new global world. In short, the FNCC's narrative was used to justify the end of the status quo.

### *Juan Valdez rebels: coffee strikes and the FNCC's loss of historical legitimacy*

The conflicts that took place between the FNCC and a large group of coffee farmers between 2012 and 2013 show how the organization's narrative became a public good that could be wielded against the FNCC itself. In February 2012, the coffee industry faced the most serious schism in its history. A group of coffee farmers who supplied the FNCC

created a parallel organization known as *Movimiento por la Defensa y Dignidad de los Cafeteros Colombianos* (Movement for the Dignity and Defense of the Colombian Coffee Growers, hereafter *Dignidad*) to protest against plans made between the FNCC and the Colombian government to increase the share of these farmers' mandatory contribution to the National Coffee Fund. The protesting farmers considered that the terms of agreement between the FNCC and the government were detrimental to coffee farmers but beneficial for the FNCC leadership and the central government.

In June 2012 *Dignidad* drafted a list of demands that included a new price support system for the coffee they produced, price controls for inputs, and a withdrawal of the joint initiative between the FNCC and the government to increase by a 100 per cent the fee that coffee farmers had to pay to the National Coffee Fund (from US\$0.06 to US\$0.12 per pound). Tensions resulting from the refusal to grant the farmers their demands led to massive demonstrations across the coffee regions, in which protesters had the support of local mayors and regional congressmen. To the disappointment of the *Dignidad* supporters, the government eventually withdrew the plan to increase the contribution required of the farmers to the National Coffee Fund, but refused to cede on the other demands. By November 2012, *Dignidad* demanded in vain a new price support from the government and the FNCC.

The Colombian government initially dismissed the movement. Not only did it declare that the FNCC was the "legitimate" representative of the coffee workers, but Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos also added in a speech that a strike was "unfair and unnecessary" (Cruz-Rodríguez, 2013; "Santos: el innecesario paro cafetero," 2013). The following section below shows how the dissidents legitimized their movement by using the narrative that the FNCC had created in the past as a public good.

*The use of a public good to challenge those who created it: the adoption of the FNCC's historical narrative among the dissenting coffee farmers*

As long as the threats of a strike continued to loom, the *Dignidad* movement and its supporters increasingly used the narrative about the coffee industry's that the FNCC had crafted and harnessed for decades, intentionally linking it to the wider narrative about the Colombian nation-state, and the promises of economic development around coffee. This shows how the non-exclusionary narrative created by the FNCC eventually became a public good that those feeling identified either with the coffee industry and the Colombian nation-state could use.

By early February of 2013, a strike of the coffee farmers seemed imminent. Both

the FNCC and the Colombian government made efforts to delegitimize the movement, arguing that *Dignidad* did not officially represent the coffee farmers. The Minister of Agriculture, Juan Camilo Restrepo, went even further by suggesting that *Dignidad* was covertly steered by destabilizing forces. Once the strike started, it quickly became violent, but it nevertheless received support from representatives on opposing sides of the political spectrum. The leaders of the communist FARC guerrillas (who at that time were engaged in peace negotiations with the Santos government) reminded the president that, in his inaugural speech, he had promised to turn every Colombian farmer into a “prosperous and smiling Juan Valdez,” and asked rhetorically, “Where is this fairy-tale Juan Valdez?”, while former right-wing president Alvaro Uribe expressed his “unconditional support” for the strikers (“Uribe y ‘Márquez’ en apoyo al paro cafetero,” 2013).

During the 2013 coffee strike, the respective leaderships of the FNCC and *Dignidad* waged mutual accusations of illegitimacy. The *Dignidad* leaders rejected the agreement between the FNCC and the government, arguing that only the elites had participated in it, while the FNCC used its historical role as representative of every level of the coffee industry to defend its legitimacy (Cruz-Rodríguez, 2013). In a statement published by *Dignidad* in the midst of the strike, its leadership claimed that they were simply asking for justice for the members of an industry that “had given so much to the country” and that the time had come for the coffee farmers to form an organization independent from the FNCC, which had been created by the country’s elites (Movimiento Dignidad Cafetera, 2013). They appealed to their historical role as generators of development, one that went beyond simply paying taxes and encompassed an industry that had played a role in providing infrastructure, housing, education, and other basic services to the coffee region (Movimiento Dignidad Cafetera, 2013).

Supporters also criticized how the FNCC had been funded throughout its existence from the resources of a state historically controlled by the economic elites (MOIR, 2015). In fact, the *Dignidad* movement argued that as they were the representatives of the people actually working the land and not the FNCC elite, they knew best how to use the National Coffee Fund’s resources, which, according to them, had been misused in creating the large and unmanageable FNCC conglomerate, which had not benefitted the coffee farmers (Movimiento Dignidad Cafetera, 2013). Images used in the *Dignidad* demonstrations contrasted poor farmers with rich FNCC officials (see Figure 4).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 AROUND HERE]

In a very telling interview with a striking coffee farmer, the farmer repeats how a “bloodsucking” FNCC had invested the “fruit of [his] labor” in useless investments to build a conglomerate that had not benefited the farmers, even though for “more than 80 years the farmers had created wealth and economic growth in Colombia,” immediately after which he bursts into tears in front of the camera (Salmón Urbano [SALMONURBANOTV], 2013). On social media websites, other farmers reproduced a poem that they had written, and in which they highlight their work: “I fertilized the mountain with red grains that forged the homeland” (“Caficultores presentes en el sur de Ibagué,” 2013).

The coffee strikers also made use of images linked to the early champions of the coffee industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Banners displayed during the strike quoted the nineteenth-century liberal politician and military man Rafael Uribe Uribe who, in 1888, invoked the historical vulnerability and uncertainty of international coffee prices to advocate for government support to the coffee growers (see Figure 5). Using Uribe Uribe’s quote, the banner asks in the end, “Why, then, do we need to increase our share [in the National Coffee Fund]?” Other banners appealed to the image of the *antioqueño* coffee grower as the hardworking, individualistic pioneer cultivated by the Antioquia intellectuals (and the FNCC) for decades.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 AROUND HERE]

In expressing his support to the strikers, left-wing congressman Jorge Robledo said “*Colombia es café o no es*” (“Colombia is coffee or it does not exist”), clearly playing with the *Colombia es café* slogan created by the FNCC, to which he added, “coffee is closely linked to Colombian culture (...) Coffee has had a crucial presence in our history, in our presidents, in our congressmen” (“Paro cafetero en Colombia une a rivales políticos,” 2013). Robledo was not simply playing with the organization’s slogan; he was appealing to a genuine feeling nationwide that the coffee industry belonged to the entire population. During the strike, demonstrators also used the iconic image of Juan Valdez, this time portraying him as an impoverished farmer and victim of the FNCC’s greed (see Figures 6, 7, and 8), an element also used by those supporting the strikers.

[INSERT FIGURES 6, 7, AND 8 AROUND HERE]

In sum, the coffee strikers of 2013 and those supporting them made heavy use of a

particular historical narrative promoted by the FNCC. The narrative, as we argue, became a public good (especially because it was also related to the Colombian national identity) that was being used to dissent from and oppose the FNCC.

## **Conclusion**

This paper studies the creation of a series of myths and narratives by an organization and analyzes how these become a strategy to build and maintain high levels of political power in a country that is highly dependent on that organization's activities. We show how this type of narrative—once produced—becomes a public good that can be appropriated by other actors including those opposing the organization, particularly if there is a perception among the public that the organization's actions do not match their narrative. In countries whose economy is not diversified and are strongly dependent upon a single organization controlling an export good, the narrative developed by that organization can be consistent with the narrative articulated around the myths and traditions concerning the creation of the nation-state to which the organization belongs.

We show the benefits of using Samuelson's concept of public goods in tandem with the notion of the creation of historical narratives by organizations (Foster, et al., 2012), and the theories about the creation of myths in nation states as advanced by Hobsbawm (2012a, b) and Anderson (1991), to analyze the creation of an organizational narrative that is closely linked to that of the nation-state and, therefore, liable of being appropriated by those identifying themselves as members of that nation-state. By studying an underdeveloped economy like Colombia's we also take into consideration characteristics shared by many non-OECD countries, including the existence of imperfect democracies (dominated by clientelistic systems), the scarcity of economic diversification, and an ever-elusive promise of economic prosperity for all.

We study the particular case of the FNCC, the organization controlling Colombian coffee exports from the 1920s to the 2010s. The FNCC acquired enormous political and economic power because it controlled the country's main exports. This organization developed a narrative about itself as the entity that promoted a commodity and had successively played various roles: first, in creating the national economy after decades of fragmentation; second, in inserting Colombia in the global economy; third, in operating in accordance with the values of the celebrated *antioqueño* coffee farmers; and, fourth, in representing the common coffee farmer due to its "democratic" governance structure. The FNCC deployed considerable efforts to create a "coffee culture" in the coffee-producing areas, while highlighting parallels between its evolution, that of its

leaders, and the stereotype of the entrepreneurial spirit of the *antioqueños*.

The world order that made the rise of the FNCC possible collapsed in 1989 after the end of the International Coffee Agreement, an event followed by constitutional changes that weakened the FNCC in conjunction with long-term changes in the Colombian economy in which coffee lost its previous importance. In the 2010s, a group of dissident farmers called for a strike due to changes in the mandatory contributions to the National Coffee Fund. We show how these farmers used the narrative developed over decades by the FNCC to portray themselves as the legitimate representatives of those working in the coffee industry, while defining the FNCC as a parasitic and abusive organization. By following this strategy, the dissenting farmers gained support from different political and social groups.

Our findings support the arguments advanced by Nairn (1977) and Beckman (2013) according to which countries that have limited sources of income, a subordinate role in the world economy, and too few elements from which to generate national pride (which in turn generates national unity) have to focus on the culture existing around a commodity and the promises for development that this commodity can fuel. As a result, nationalism can be defined in relation to a particular natural resource (López-Alves, 2013). For decades, the FNCC repeatedly told the Colombian people that *Colombia es café*, leading those participating in the industry to think of themselves as the representatives of that history that the FNCC promoted. The use of the fictional character of Juan Valdez exemplified the organization's project to legitimize itself vis-à-vis the Colombian population while simultaneously creating and circulating on a global scale a romanticized image of the process of producing Colombian coffee.

We believe that our approach can open new avenues for research. First, the economies of many other countries in the world are controlled by a handful of firms in charge of commodity exports. What types of historical narratives have firms like Gazprom, Aramco, or Iranian Oil Company developed in order to legitimize their power? Second, the creation of a historical narrative to justify political power is not limited to underdeveloped or emerging economies. Take the case of the US-based National Rifle Association (NRA). For years, this organization has justified its opposition to gun control initiatives by appealing to a historical past and an extremely strong defense of a single amendment in the US Constitution. Even though constitutions can be re-amended or reformed, the NRA has portrayed itself as a defender of the most basic ideas that the founders of the American republic had when writing the documents guaranteeing the freedoms of the country's citizens.

Political developments also show how narratives that become public goods can

backfire against those who originally promoted them. Donald Trump's campaign for the Republican Party's candidacy in the United States 2016 presidential elections constitutes another such example. This candidate appropriated a message long promoted by members of his party (particularly nativism and opposition to cultural changes that threatened "traditions") and used it against what he called the party "establishment" (Heer, 2016). The case shows that the Republican Party could not control the narrative it had created once it circulated it. Once out, the narrative became a public good and could be used by anyone for any purpose. In sum, we believe that there is a promising field here that can be used for many studies concerning the legitimation strategies of organizations, relationships between organizations and the larger institutional environment, and uses of the past in both OECD and non-OECD societies.

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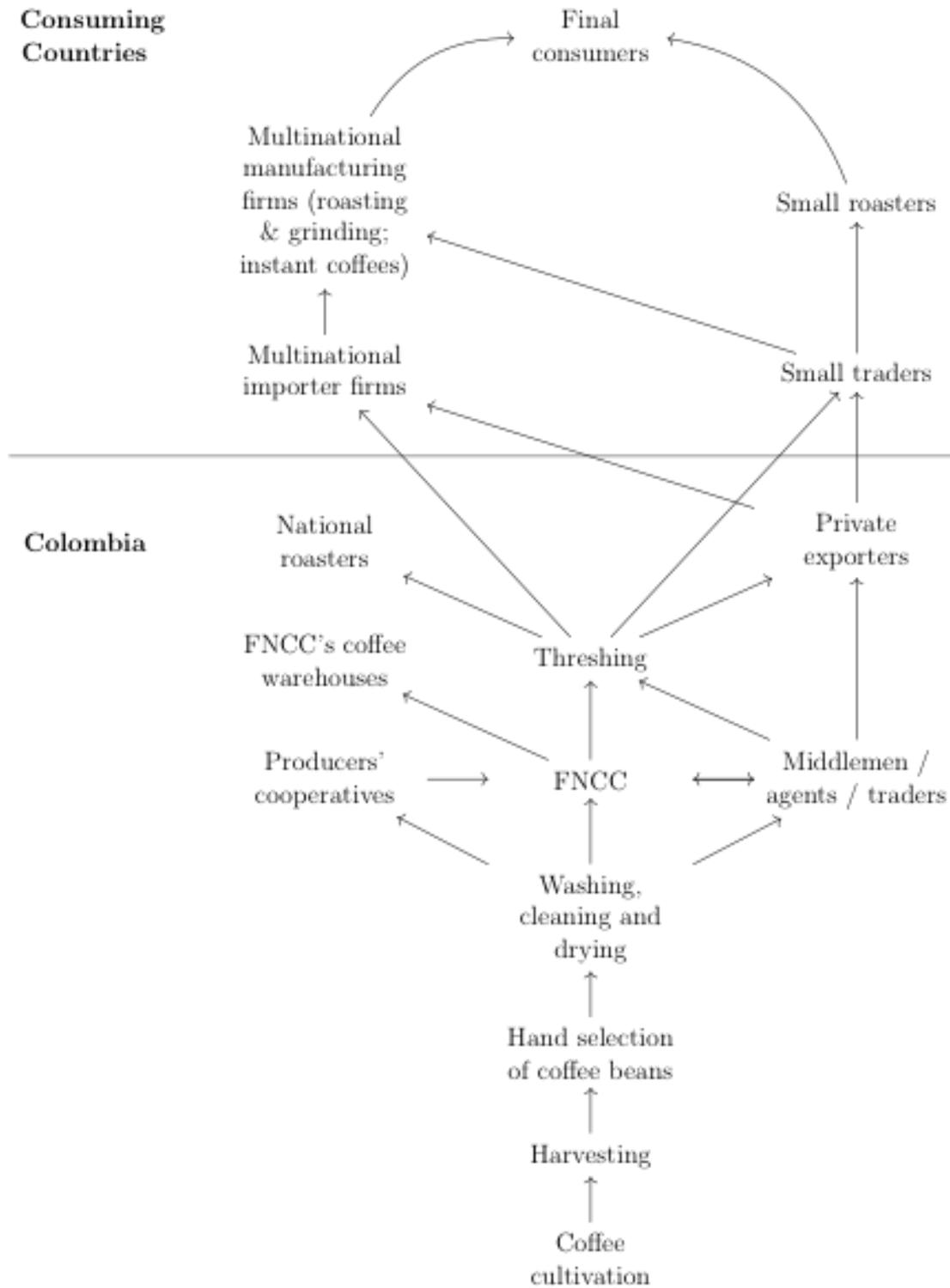
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## Tables and Figures



**Figure 1:** Promotion of Juan Valdez coffee shop in Manhattan (2004). Source: “Tu Vez Blast-From-The-Past Truck: Juan Valdez” (2012).



**Figure 2:** Colombian Coffee Global Value-Chain. Adapted from Talbot (2004), Palacios (1980), and Roldán-Pérez, et al. (2015).



**Figure 3:** FNCC's structure. *Source:* FNCC (2014).

Period	Coffee (USD, Millions)	Total (USD, Millions)	Share of Coffee on Total Exports
1908-1924	414	699	59.2%
1925-1949	2,162	3,274	66.0%
1950-1969	7,441	10,447	71.2%
1970-1989	27,797	60,522	45.9%
1990-1999	12,807	71,105	18.0%

**Table 1:** Colombia: Coffee Exports as Percentage of Total Exports (Nominal US Dollars). *Source:* GRECO (2002, pp. 223).



**Figure 4:** Banner Contrasting Poor Farmers with Rich FNCC Officials (2013 Coffee Strike). Source: Movimiento Dignidad Cafetera (2013).



**Figure 5:** Coffee strike, 2013. Source: Movimiento Dignidad Cafetera (2013).



**Figure 6:** Use of Juan Valdez logo against the FNCC. Sources: Making the World Safe For Hypocrisy (2010); Urrea Cuéllar (2013).



**Figure 7:** Coffee striker using the Juan Valdez logo in 2013. The text reads “See the face, don’t know the coffee”, relating to the popular adage “See the face, don’t know the heart”. Source: Romero (2013).



**Figure 8:** Use of the Juan Valdez image during the 2013 coffee strike. Source: “Cauca y Popayán, en crisis por paro cafetero” (2013).