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One hundred years of authoritarian practices: United Fruit and its banana plantation workers

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Abstract

The statist focus of comparative politics has withheld from view the ability of powerful actors such as transnational corporations to engage in authoritarian practices on their own initiative, in different alliances, regardless of the national regime type in which they find themselves. Focusing on plantation-level interactions, this article analyses how the United Fruit Company and its successor companies could control and exploit its workers, using silencing, secrecy and subterfuge so as to sabotage accountability, from the 1900s to the early 2000s. Over time, the company's practices evolved from violent repression and mass dismissals to manipulating trade unions to a mix of engagement, deception, and outsourcing to evade accountability. This corresponded to scalar shifts: the company always operated transnationally, but workers moved from local to national and finally transnational organising, curtailing the company's room for manoeuvre. Spatially, the company's physical control over its plantation workers could be as forceful as that of a national state, but its 'territory' has been one of shape-shifting network nodes, becoming even more 'porous' in the twenty-first century. This spatial mobility and ambiguity has in turn been deployed by the company to sabotage accountability to its workers.

Keywords Authoritarian practices · Corporate social responsibility · Global value chains · Labour exploitation · Labour relations · Trade unions · United Fruit Company

Introduction

The primary purpose of corporate enterprises is, of course, to make a profit for their owners or shareholders. They may be able to do so in many different political contexts. Where companies thrive, and whether they intersect with forms of

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authoritarianism, depends on many circumstances. But in certain corporate sectors and geographical settings, engagement with authoritarianism is much more likely than in others. Most articles in this Special Issue address international relations between transnational corporate and financial actors and autocratic *regimes*, suggesting that today as in the past, the former may be facilitating, perhaps even driving, democratic backsliding or authoritarian resilience.

This contribution takes a different perspective, suggesting that to understand the full extent of corporate involvement in manifestations of authoritarianism, we need to look beyond corporate relations with national regimes. I will illustrate this point with a case study of the United Fruit Company and its successor companies United Brands and Chiquita. Drawing on secondary sources, the case study supports a theoretical contribution: to demonstrate how both at local and at transnational levels, multinational corporations can be the *lead actors* in what I term ‘authoritarian practices’, with agents of the state and other actors in an ancillary role. Engagement in such practices of disabling voice and disabling access to information can be perceived by companies as useful, perhaps even necessary to turn over a profit.

Since the story of the company’s initial political dominance in ‘banana republics’, and in particular its role in the overthrow of President Arbenz of Guatemala, is already well-told (see for instance (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1982; Acker 1988; Bucheli 2008; Coleman 2016; Musicant 1990), I will focus on plantation-level interactions with the company’s workers rather than on interactions with national governments. Taking a *longue duree* perspective, examining authoritarian practices from the 1900s to the 2000s, will demonstrate how these practices evolved, accumulating new strategies to respond to new circumstances over time. There has been a gradual shift from practices of silencing workers to practices of secrecy and subterfuge, i.e. deceiving or misleading workers. The contribution will also give attention to the spatial aspects of United Fruit’s authoritarian practices: multinational company’s spatial capabilities differ from those of an authoritarian regime that has formal control over its national territory.

Structure, selection and sources

In the next section, I will introduce the concept of ‘authoritarian practices’, and elucidate corporate incentives for authoritarian practices in relations with workers in particular. Subsequently, I will provide a brief overview of the nature and history of the United Fruit Company and its successor companies. The next four sections, from “Prelude” to “Misleading workers and transnational coalitions” are empirical, and largely chronological: after an overture on the company’s dealings with prior inhabitants, they describe three overlapping periods, marking continuity and change in United Fruit’s authoritarian practices vis-à-vis its workers.

The article relies on secondary sources, primarily by academics. United Fruit and its successors have been the subject of various monographs (Bourgeois 1989; Bucheli 2005; Striffler 2002; Frundt 2009; MacCameron 1983) as well as shorter academic treatments by anthropologists, sociologists and labour and business historians. Their work has been based on fieldwork at various plantations, interviews and document



analysis of company archives and contemporary local media coverage. I have gratefully drawn on their empirical material and some of their analytical insights, while making a different theoretical argument.

Each of the four empirical sections will start with a spotlight on one particular banana-growing region: the area spreading outwards from the Sixaola River and the eponymous border town, comprising the province of Limon in Costa Rica in the North and West, and Bocas del Toro in Panama in the South. It is an appropriate place to zoom in on for various reasons. First, on the Costa Rican side, it marks the company's birthplace: United Fruit found its origins in the building of a railway line from San José to the coast, which was unsuccessful in its own right, but became an opportunity for planting and transporting bananas from the cleared jungle (Bucheli 2008: 442). Second, both sides of the border have been a focal point for labour activism, and for academic studies of corporate–labour relations, for a very long time. These sections rely heavily on Bourgois (1989), who sketches their history from the 1900s to the time of his own fieldwork in the 1980s, and Frundt (2009, 2010) and Sawchuk (2004), who take the story further, each with their own theoretical lens, into the early twenty-first century. Finally, the region is of interest precisely because it is on the border: national regime type studies have generally considered Costa Rica as more democratic and respectful of human rights than Panama for most of the twentieth century. However, that distinction was not always particularly evident to plantation workers in the border region, where the company's practices loomed much larger than national regime type.

Having described the actions taken by the company and its allies in the Limon/Bocas region, the article zooms out, in each of the empirical sections, to review evidence of similar practices elsewhere in Costa Rica and Panama and in Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala and Honduras. The ambition in these 'broader practices' sections is not to provide a comprehensive account of the extent to which, or the ways in which, United Fruit deployed authoritarian practices. In accordance with the definition of authoritarian practices presented below, these sections seek to show that the company's behaviour was not incidental or unique to the Limon/Bocas region, but that it was part of a 'broader pattern of actions' that together can be considered as authoritarian practices.

The concluding section draws out the temporal continuities and shifts, scalar dynamics and spatial dimensions of the authoritarian practices deployed by the company in the three different era's, and discusses implications for our understanding of the intersection between authoritarianism studies and political economy.

Corporate authoritarian practices

Authoritarian practices as accountability sabotage

Scholars of globalisation have extensively researched how, why and to what extent 'the autonomy of democratically elected governments has been, and is increasingly, constrained by sources of unelected and unrepresentative economic power' (Held 2003: 519). Authoritarianism research by contrast has overwhelmingly presupposed



(with a few recent, critical IPE-inspired exceptions such as Bruff and Tansel 2019; Jenss and Schuetze 2021) that the relevant arena for studying politics, authoritarian or democratic, is the national government. Instead of the static and statist concept of ‘authoritarian regimes’, I seek to characterise and identify authoritarian *practices*, rather than authoritarian systems, as a unit of analysis.

Authoritarian practices are about ‘accountability sabotage’ (Glasius 2023: 19–23). A closer look at the meaning of accountability itself will clarify why it matters, and what would constitute sabotaging it. Mark Bovens’ definition can serve as a point of departure: ‘Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to *explain and justify* his or her conduct, the forum can *pose questions and pass judgment*, and the actor may face consequences’ (Bovens 2007: 450, italics mine). If accountability entails flows of information and communication between powerful actors and their ‘forum’, i.e. the people they affect, then accountability sabotage is about blocking and disrupting information and communication.

Demanding accountability requires a sense of agency not always available to subordinates in hierarchical power relations (Gaventa 1980: 7–13; Scott 1990: xi, 17). At the same time, a complete absence of contestation is characteristic only of periods of profound terror. Even people who lack established political repertoires, organisational structures or ‘appropriate’ language for demanding accountability often express their voices in their own way (see Scott 1990: 183–201). Typically, accountability is not an end in itself. People want clean air, fair wages, affordable housing, etc., but demanding accountability is a means, or process, towards achieving those ends.

Authoritarian practices are not a mere lack of accountability: they pre-empt or respond to demands for accountability. Practices are, simply put, ‘patterned actions that are embedded in particular organized contexts’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 5). A practice-based approach to authoritarianism can also comprise authoritarian practices ‘performed by collectives in unison’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 8). An authoritarian practice can be defined as ‘*a pattern of actions, embedded in an organized context, sabotaging accountability to people (‘the forum’) over whom a configuration of actors exert control, or their representatives, by disabling their voice and their access to information*’ (Glasius 2023: 22, italics in original). The blocking of the upward flow of information and communication, i.e. disabling voice, is operationalised as the authoritarian practice of silencing. Disabling access to information is operationalised as two theoretically distinct but empirically intertwined practices: secrecy and subterfuge. Secrecy is about withholding information or doing things covertly, subterfuge refers to deliberate use of misinformation and deception.

Thinking in terms of authoritarian *practices* as a unit of analysis has three distinct advantages. First, unlike regime-based definitions that typically define authoritarianism negatively, as a lack of democracy, it considers authoritarianism as requiring agency, as something that takes work to maintain. Second, the concept lends itself to assessing the behaviour of actors, within, below, or beyond the state in terms of ‘authoritarianness’, in this case focusing on corporate actors. Finally, a practice-based approach to authoritarianism does not presuppose there is always a single political actor behind them; it can shine a light on configurations of actors involved



in the practices of silencing and of secrecy and subterfuge. Having defined the concept of authoritarian practices and explained its analytical advantages, I will now consider what circumstances might give rise to *corporate* authoritarian practices, specifically in the context of a multinational company's relations with its workers.

Corporate authoritarian practices in worker relations

There may be many corporate incentives for authoritarian practices: perhaps secrecy and subterfuge are necessary, and people must be silenced, about tax evasion and corruption, or about damage to the environment or to public health, or in relation to 'unethical products' such as addictive products, arms or spyware. United Fruit and its successors have been subject to claims in relation to all but the last of these issues. However, the most consistently contentious issue, which has been at the core of its business model throughout its history, has been the company's relations with its workers.

Corporate authoritarian practices vis-à-vis workers are likely to occur in industries that depend on cheap, hard or demeaning labour, or dangerous labour. In such circumstances, it is attractive to sabotage accountability to the workers by disabling their ability to voice complaints, to gather information, and to communicate with each other and with other politically relevant actors. They are best kept unaware of their rights, and unaware of the contrast between their wages and circumstances and the company's ultimate profit margins.

Crane's (2013) work on the most extreme form of labour exploitation, modern slavery, provides a useful framework for thinking through what factors would tend to facilitate and reward labour exploitation, and can speak to their relation to corporate authoritarian practices. He distinguishes between contextual enabling conditions and the employers' institutional capabilities. The enabling conditions he enumerates are the industry context, the socio-economic context, the cultural context, the geographic context and last but not least the regulatory context. Institutional capabilities include access to and deployment of violence; debt management; opacity in accounting to workers and to other companies, and labour supply chain management. The institutional capabilities a company can deploy to sustain labour exploitation are to a large extent 'information-blocking capabilities', i.e. disabling workers' voice and their access to information and communication. These capabilities in turn help to shape the enabling conditions.

I will also draw on the literature on trade unionism in Latin America (Alexander 2008; Chomsky 2007; Hough 2012) and the critical literature on corporate social responsibility and subcontracting (Crouch 2006; LeBaron 2014; Chan and Siu 2010; Arslan 2020). The rise, first of trade unionism and then of corporate social responsibility, has altered the playing field and strategies of corporations who rely on mechanisms to silence workers. This was clearly recognised by United Fruit and its successor brand Chiquita. Corporate social responsibility can have paradoxical effects on corporate authoritarian practices. One might expect that pressures generated by civil society and brought to bear on companies via pressure from shareholders, customers or government regulators provide incentives for corporations to treat and pay



their workers well. Visible violations of what are now broadly considered minimal ethical standards for corporations might involve too many downside risks. As Lange and Washburn (2012: 300) point out: ‘counternormative behaviour can lead to such consequences for the firm as lawsuits, financial losses through settlements and sales declines, increases in the cost of capital, market share deterioration, network partner loss, or other costs associated with a negative reputation’. However, it may also be ‘cheaper to pursue reputation alone’ than to actually improve corporate behaviour (Crouch 2006: 1543). The very same risks that can motivate good corporate behaviour can also provide increased incentives for further silencing, secrecy and subterfuge, so as to avoid compromising information being exposed. While it will depend on a host of factors whether and to what extent corporations will take an ethical leap forward or engage in authoritarian practices, the potential for the latter was rather overdetermined in the Chiquita case, as will be described in the last sub-section of each of the empirical sections. That overdetermination provides useful insights into how the corporate–authoritarian nexus functioned in this ‘likely case’. The empirical sections will show how corporate authoritarian practices evolved in response to shifts in the national and transnational normative environment and the workers’ capacity for organising nationally and transnationally, but also displayed remarkable continuity across space and time.

The United Fruit Company and its successors

The Octopus

United Fruit was created in 1899 through the merger of three existing companies owned by Bostonian businessmen. At the transcontinental level, it dominated the global banana market for decades. The company has been nicknamed *El Pulpo*, the Octopus, because in its heyday, between the 1910s and the 1960s, it stifled competition through vertical integration and dominance of transport networks, extending its tentacles over the Americas. Its ‘impressive production and distribution network included plantations, hospitals, roads, railways, telegraph lines, housing facilities, and ports in the producing countries, a steamship fleet ... and a distribution network in the United States’ (Bucheli 2004: 182).

At the plantation level, United Fruit’s control could be near-absolute. Striffler has described for Tenguel, Ecuador in the 1940s and 1950s how ‘United Fruit owned everything within the zone, from the machinery and infrastructure to the workers’ houses, water, and electricity. Control over points of entry into the core of the hacienda was facilitated by the fact that the company owned the means of transportation’ (Striffler 2002: 43–44).

At the same time, United Fruit’s spatial arrangements were always in a state of flux. Throughout its history, the company constantly bought, sold, leased or abandoned land, as well as at times buying banana’s from locally owned plantations. In the early decades, the main driver of this extreme mobility was the devastating ‘Panama disease’. In later decades, market forces and socio-political conditions including worker demands



played a major role. Hence, the existence, size and shape of the plantation nodes in its network were extremely unstable.

Between 1954 and 1984, United Fruit and its successor company United Brands progressively lost market share, cut its Central American acreage to a quarter of its previous size and increasingly bought bananas from local plantation owners (Frundt 2009: 19, quoting Stover and Simmons 1987: 431). The company made a comeback in the 1980s, renamed Chiquita, buying up new land. Having survived bankruptcy in the early 2000s, Chiquita was acquired by two Brazilian companies in 2014 (Parra-Bernal and Ramakrishnan 2014). It continues to this day to operate its own plantations in a number of Latin American countries, as well as entering into ever-changing contractual relations with locally-owned plantations. With its long and checkered history throughout the Americas, United Fruit makes an excellent case study for understanding continuity and change in corporate authoritarian practices.

The company and its workers

Harvesting bananas is hard, back-breaking work (Bourgeois 1989: 130–131; Forster 2003: 201). The extent to which United Fruit's labour policies were inherently exploitative, or were experienced as such by the workforce, has varied over time and space. On the one hand, its wages were often higher than elsewhere in the economy (Bourgeois 1989: 186, 196; Striffler 2002: 48; Forster 2003: 210), and the company typically provided housing (of variable quality, Bourgeois 1989, 4–5; Striffler 2002: 45–46; Bucheli 2005: 46; MacCameron 1983: 15; Forster 2003: 198) and sometimes free healthcare in company hospitals or clinics (Striffler 2002: 47; MacCameron 1983: 14–15; Bucheli 2005: 47, 71, 141).

On the other hand, the company often preferred to rely on temporary rather than permanent contracts (Bucheli 2004: 133; Forster 2003: 197, 210; Frundt 2009: 146), so it could easily shrink or grow its labour force in accordance with natural and political circumstances, including labour unrest (Bourgeois 1989: 19–22). At times, the company resisted wage rises in keeping with inflation (MacCameron 1983: 22, 101–102), refused to pay overtime (Acker 1988: 83; MacCameron 1983: 21; Forster 2003: 210), or avoided paying sick leave, medical bills or retirement benefits to workers or their dependents (Bourgeois 1989: 69–72, 126–127, 133–134; Forster 2003: 210–211). There is also evidence of the company's cavalier attitude to the health threats associated with spraying of pesticides and fertilisers, for which even minimal protection was not always provided (Marquardt 2002; Bourgeois 1989: 127–129; Forster 2003: 202, 211).

In all, workers frequently had cause to seek and spread information about their rights and to challenge their treatment by the company. From United Fruit's perspective, there were clear institutional incentives to disable the voice of the workers and to disable flows of information about working conditions and workers' rights.



Prelude: clearing the ‘virgin jungle’

Silencing intractable occupants in Limon/Bocas

On the Costa Rican side of the Sixaola River, United Fruit purchased much of its lands “for symbolic sums through intermediaries who ‘colonized’ it from the government as ‘virgin jungle’ ” (Bourgois 1989: 25, 247). In reality, the land was at least in part inhabited by the Bribri people, who were expelled from their lands around Talamanca between 1908 and 1914. The company’s method of expulsion was to destroy their settlements.

Company records confirm that the Bribri were expelled from their land; anecdotal evidence suggests United Fruit silenced occupants who resisted their removal. Bourgois (1989: 28–31) has documented two stories based on oral accounts. First, a Bribri king was said to have been poisoned in 1910 at the behest of the company because he protested the expropriation. Second, a ‘black Indian’ leader of Jamaican origin named Dixon, who owned a small banana farm ‘went on various delegations to San José to talk to the government’ about the burning down of Bribri houses. The company blacklisted him as a supplier (Bourgois 1989: 29). While the poisoning story in particular had, according to Bourgois (1989: 31) ‘become politicized’, with supporters and opponents of the company telling contradictory versions, Dixon’s account came directly from his son, and comports with a letter from a company official complaining about black immigrants ‘resisting forcible expulsion’ (cited in Bourgois 1989: 30). The king was—if the poisoning story is true—silenced with lethal violence, whereas in Dixon’s case the mechanism of silencing was material deprivation. Both violent and material practices of silencing would also come to be routinely used against workers.

Broader practices of silencing intractable occupants

The violent expulsion of the Bribri has a better documented parallel in Guatemala. Near Santa Ana Mixtan on the Pacific Coast, a group of settlers on unused but company-owned land complained to their congressman about company harassment in the 1940s. A compromise brokered by the government was eventually reneged on by the company, which ‘destroyed the houses of thirteen families on the pretext that the structures were too dangerous to inhabit’ (Forster 2003: 197). Silencing critics of the company by destroying their habitation is another instrument that also came to be used against workers. The incident also provides an early example of the company using *subterfuge* to legitimise its method of silencing, i.e. by claiming the houses were structurally unsound.

These experiences of expropriation on Costa Rica’s Atlantic and Guatemala’s Pacific coast are not universal. At the Hacienda Tenguel in Ecuador, peasants were forced to sell their land in the early 1930s, but got a good price for it, managed to avoid eviction and eventually outlasted the company (Striffler 2002: 61–82). The extent of forcible expropriations and silencing of dissent by prior inhabitants is difficult to assess. Forster (2003), for Guatemala, as well as Acker (1988: 61) for



Honduras, cite literary treatments to substantiate claims about mass expropriation when United Fruit first arrived. It may indeed be true that ‘entire generations ... had been removed from the land without a trace entering the official record’ (Forster 2003: 196). What these brief references allude to is that, quite apart from active silencing, not all voices of potential targets of authoritarian practices are audible to later academic researchers, and some only live on in oral renderings, or are forever lost.

Repressing strikes and pre-empting unionization

Early twentieth century context

Deploying Crane’s (2013) framework of conditions and capabilities enabling labour exploitation, it is easy to understand why in the early decades of the twentieth century, the position of banana workers was extremely weak. The contexts in which they worked were such as to favour not only their exploitation as such, but also the ability to silence them whenever they attempted to protest or organise. Plantation life was geographically isolated, and banana workers were often either former peasants, or ‘imported’ from other regions or neighbouring countries, hence they typically lacked lines of communication to local or national power-holders. One advantage the workers did have was the labour-intensive nature of the sector and the scale of the plantations: hundreds, sometimes thousands of workers, all worked and lived in relatively close proximity to each other, giving them the potential to exchange information, network and organise considerable disruptions to harvesting and shipping to reinforce their demands.

The company also actively deployed its capabilities to silence the banana workers and prevent them from organising. Most important was undoubtedly its access to the brute force of the state. As documented elsewhere (Acker 1988; Bucheli 2008; Coleman 2016), it had the ability to install, pay or bribe local and national politicians and law enforcement officials to act in the company’s interests, sometimes with the help of elements of the United States government. The following three subsections will first focus on practices of silencing workers in the Limon/Bocas region, then show how similar practices were replicated in other plantation sites, and finally discuss the exact nature of these practices and the division of roles between the company itself and state security forces.

Silencing workers in Limon/Bocas

The Limon and Bocas plantations of the United Fruit Company have a long history of labour activism. Throughout the 1910s, there were frequent strikes on the Costa Rican side. The company followed a policy of silencing worker demands by routinely firing any workers associated with labour activism, as well as calling on the police and sometimes soldiers on both sides of the border to violently repress protests. As soon as a trade union was formed in 1910, consisting mainly of West



Indian workers, the company began firing its members. A general strike ensued, and police fired into crowds in Limon in 1910, wounding 48 strikers (Bourgois 1989: 54). During another strike in 1913, strike leaders were jailed, beaten, and in one case killed by Costa Rican soldiers and police, while Panamanian soldiers were mobilised to prevent the strike spreading. The strike leaders were all fired (Bourgois 1989: 54–55). Again in 1918–1919, ‘two strikers were killed ... dozens were wounded, and the entire leadership imprisoned’ (Bourgois 1989: 57). The company meanwhile fired many strikers, expelled them from company housing and even burnt down their make-shift huts. It subsequently rehired all but a handful of leaders, who were blacklisted (Bourgois 1989: 57–58). In response to another strike by United Fruit port workers in Limon in 1920, the police burnt down the trade union’s headquarters (Alexander 2008: 40). During this strike and again on a larger scale in response to a strike in Limon in 1934, the Costa Rican authorities also resorted to deportation of non-national workers, in particular Nicaraguans and West Indians (Bourgois 1989: 92, 206).

Silencing workers: a broader pattern

United Fruit’s ‘zero-tolerance’ policy of silencing labour activism and strike action was replicated at many plantations throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The company would rely on security forces to repress protests, while it would frequently fire workers in periods of unrest, and physically expel vocal workers and labour organisers from plantations. In extreme circumstances, just as in Limon, striking United Fruit workers were shot at and sometimes killed by police or military forces. The most infamous incident is undoubtedly the massacre at Cienega, Colombia in 1928, immortalised by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. After negotiations between striking workers and the company broke down because it refused to recognise the union (Bucheli 2004: 130–131), ‘the army opened fire against peaceful demonstrators who could not defend themselves and were making legitimate demands’ (Bucheli 2005: 133).

While shooting to kill has been a relative rarity, state forces from different countries regularly jailed striking United Fruit workers, sometimes officially declaring a strike illegal, for instance in Colombia 1924 (Bucheli 2005: 122). Strikers were also arrested in Honduras in 1930 and in 1932, in both cases accompanied by the declaration of a national emergency and imposition of martial law (Alexander 2008: 122; Acker 1988: 82). Arrests were deployed in Guatemala in 1944 (Forster 2003: 204), and again in Honduras in 1954, where members of the Central Strike Committee were arrested and branded ‘communist’ in the midst of negotiations (MacCameron 1983: 40).

In terms of the company’s own means of silencing, it relied on firing unionists or even just alleged ‘troublemakers’ and removing them from the plantations, as well as keeping anyone with a political agenda out. Thus, in Tiquisate, Guatemala in the 1930s and 1940s, because of relatively high pay and the ‘temporary and often transient nature of work ... the company could stifle worker organizing and dismiss troublemakers’, such as for instance 18 workers fired on Finca Tonicapan



in 1947 (Forster 2003: 197, 212). In Tenguel, Ecuador in the 1930s and 1940s, the company disrupted flows of information and communication by spatially preventing plantation workers from contact with anyone with a political agenda: members of political parties and labour unions were prohibited by the company from entering the plantation (Striffler 2002: 44). Despite these preventive measures, instances of workers voicing complaints could still occur. Such voice was silenced through expulsion by the company itself: "If they did not conform or were seen as a potential political problem, they were sent back to [nearby cities] Guayaquil or Machala ... 'Troublemakers' were simply fired. The self-contained nature of the hacienda served to keep workers in line" (Striffler 2002: 44). While in Tenguel, 'United Fruit had its own police force', who 'took their orders directly from the superintendent' (Striffler 2002: 44–45), in most other locations, local or national authorities were involved in silencing practices: the army, police, judges, and sometimes government ministers.

Silencing through deportation of 'trouble-makers' was also a broader practice at this time. On its Pacific Coast holdings in Panama, the company itself expelled them through its ownership of the rail network: it simply put 'rabble-rousers' 'onto a train and dumped them in grasslands far from the plantations' (Fruendt 2009: 99, quoting Phillips 1987: 591). More often, deportations were carried out by the state, although in close cooperation with the company. Sometimes state agents even expelled a government's own nationals from the country. After the 1932 Honduras strike, '(a)s in past instances, the government used company planes to transport the rebel leaders to exile in El Salvador' (MacCameron 1983: 16; also Acker 1988: 82). At other times, internal displacement was used: the Guatemalan government in 1944 'jailed the union leadership, then shipped them off to the northern jungles' (Forster 2003: 204).

In response to a plantation strike near La Ceiba, Honduras in 1924, the company did the reverse of deporting workers: it imported strikebreakers from the West Indies. In the same incident, the US interfered directly to protect the company's interests, sending a Navy ship into port to prevent the strikebreakers from being hindered (Alexander 2008: 121).

Configurations of actors and practices

In this era, the company's main allies in silencing workers were always the enforcement agencies of the state, the police and the military. They were responsible for the practice of forcibly silencing workers. Their motivation for doing the company's bidding appears to have been twofold: on the one hand, they responded to orders from above, because central governments had been bribed or even installed by the company, on the other hand they were often also directly being paid for their services by the company at the local level.

The company took care of the material aspect of silencing: through the practice of mass firings of workers who voiced demands, it made sure they had no means of existence. The practice of expelling workers from their housing or destroying it reinforced this strategy. As a result, the workers' only choice was between submission (and the company frequently rehired all but the strike leaders) or exit from the plantation.



Thirdly, silencing had an important spatial dimension, in which both the company and state agents took a role. While plantations were typically remote from national political centres, communication among the considerable workforce within each plantation was easy. The company responded to this quandary with the practice of separating actual or potential labour leaders from other workers. It refused known activists access to the plantations and physically removed anyone who manifested themselves as a mobiliser of collective voice from the plantations. The company could do so through its monopoly ownership of the means of transport to, from and within the plantations, as well as housing. Additionally, it called on state agents to deport labour leaders to other countries or send them into internal exile, away from the plantations.

Domesticating unions: cooptation, manipulation, and infiltration

Mid-twentieth century context

From the 1930s and 1940s, the number and membership of trade unions mushroomed throughout the countries where United Fruit was active (Alexander 2008; Striffler 2002: 51). Sometimes they emerged precisely from their plantations, as in Costa Rica and Panama (Alexander 2008: 4, 41–45), whilst elsewhere unionism spread from urban industrial centres (Striffler 2002: 51; Alexander 2008: 216–218). While getting legal recognition from the state was not a smooth and continuous process, workers' social rights and their right to form unions, engage in collective bargaining, and go on strike became increasingly recognised throughout the region between the 1930s and the 1950s.

In the same period, many plantations became less isolated in the literal sense because of expansion of road and railway networks and telephones. Even more importantly, politically and psychologically, sharing information and networking with workers in other areas or industries became much more common. In cultural terms, Communist doctrine and Communist organising had an ambiguous but powerful effect on workers' ability to use their voice. It had a direct emancipating effect as an ideology that, translated to local conditions, appealed to and resonated with workers, or at least with labour leaders. Meanwhile, the specter of communism provoked ambiguous responses with employers and national governments. At times, fear of revolution sparked repressive responses towards moderate workers' demands, but the more structural response was to tolerate, support or even invent non-Communist labour organising.

In 1938, trade unions also became a transnational force, with the foundation of the communist-oriented Confederation of Latin American Workers, CTAL (Alexander 2008: 43). The Cold War context after World War II also marked a shift, at the transnational level, in the attitude of the CIA: instead of viewing all trade union activism as pernicious, covert CIA agents began to support and encourage anti-Communist unions in Latin America (MacCameron 1983: 98–99; Euraque 2000: 96–97; Brockett 2010: 525–527, 543). A decade after CTAL, the InterAmerican Confederation of Workers, CIT, emerged as a non-Communist alternative (Alexander 2008: 171).



United Fruit has been identified as the one of the primary resisters against recognition of trade unions and collective bargaining in the region (Alexander 2008: 28; Forster 2003: 193). Nonetheless, it had to accept that support from local and national law-enforcement against ‘rabble-rousers’ could no longer be assumed. It could no longer assume that the police, the army and the courts would break up protests, jail or deport leaders, and declare strikes illegal whenever necessary. It began to employ new tactics and forge new alliances in its practices of silencing, as well as shifting from silencing workers towards practices of secrecy and subterfuge. The next subsections will describe continuities in silencing practices, in Limon and Bocas and beyond, and then shifts from silencing to secrecy and subterfuge, again first focusing in Limon and Bocas, and then zooming out to other company locations.

Continued silencing of workers in Limon/Bocas

In Panama, in 1950 and again in 1954, workers were still fired by United Fruit for attending union meetings or trying to organise workers (Bourgois 1989: 146–147). The authorities also collaborated in spatial practices of silencing: in this case the Ministry of Labor resorted to ‘ordering the eviction of 32 families from Company housing including the Secretary General of the Union’ (telegram quoted by Bourgois 1989: 146). During this period in Panama deportation of hundreds of foreign workers, primarily Nicaraguans and Hondurans, for union organising or just complaining about working conditions, also remained a common strategy (Bourgois 1989: 205–206).

The company came to collaborate with traditional authorities to help control workers from the Indigenous Kuna people. In this case, between 1952 and the early 1960s, an indigenous chief negotiated with the company over temporary work contracts for his people, and workers deemed to have misbehaved were fired at his behest (Bourgois 1989: 163–168). He and a successor organization UTRAKUNA offered Kuna workers some collective bargaining power and protection, but also controlled their behaviour, preventing their unionisation and maintaining an intra-ethnic blacklist (Bourgois 1989: 173–176).

On the Costa Rican side, silencing workers through firing or deporting labour activists had become more challenging: the company had to get a court judgment to get strikes prohibited and needed a ‘compelling rationale’ to fire workers or get the police to intervene and make arrests. However, in 1953 it successfully found one, arguing that strike participation by pesticide workers should be classified as ‘sabotage’ because of the potential harm to the crop, and it got the *Guardia Civil* to arrest labour leaders (Marquardt 2002: 20). Because of both the pesticide argumentation and anti-communist sentiment, ‘(l)abor activists and known supporters were particularly likely to be laid off in 1960 and 1961’ (Marquardt 2002: 20–21; see also Bourgois 1989: 151).

As recently as 1982, when another strike broke out in Sixaola, in salient parallel to its actions seventy years earlier, the Rural Guard silenced workers with violence: it opened fire on crowds on several occasions and jailed over 100 workers. The company itself fired hundreds of workers (Bourgois 1989: 200–201). In this period, there was



‘a special arrangement with the Costa Rican Ministry of Security whereby local subsidiaries [of United Fruit] pay for the upkeep and the transport of local security forces when they are deployed to protect strikebreakers’. During the strike, a Company Superintendent met the Rural Guard colonel daily to discuss strategy (Bourgois 1989: 274). During another strike in 1984, Philippe Bourgois ‘personally witnessed the company’s provision of transport to the security forces’ (Bourgois 1989: 243).

Continued silencing of workers: broader patterns

Lethal responses to worker demands had become a rarity in the second half of the twentieth century, except in Guatemala. Forster has recorded a ‘forgotten’ series of massacres by the army in Tiquisate, Guatemala in 1954 after the coup against Arbenz: an estimated one thousand banana workers, union organisers and presumed communists, were taken to *Finca Jocatan* and assassinated (Forster 2003: 219–220). In Uraba, Colombia in 1964, where the company had relocated from the Northern coast, workers of the Communist-inspired union were arrested for ‘crimes such as ‘posting Communist flyers’ and ‘having foreign and subversive literature’ (Chomsky 2007: 95–96). Deportation—of aliens and nationals alike—still occurred on at least one occasion: in Honduras in 1958, president Villeda instructed his ministers to “expel from the country all ‘undesirable aliens’ and indeed, all Hondurans engaged in subversive activities” (MacCameron 1983: 102).

In other contexts, silencing by state authorities had abated, but even long after legal recognition of the right to unionise, unionists could be at risk of dismissal from the company itself. The famous 1954 national strike in Honduras was actually sparked by the company’s refusal to let a workers’ spokesman return to work (MacCameron 1983: 21). In the same year, 614 workers were fired at Port Armuelles, Panama during a strike (Bourgois 1989: 147). In Honduras, as late as 1967, a union organiser named Brizuela ‘found himself dismissed from his job every time a union election was coming up’, after which the manager ‘would withdraw his dismissal the day after the election’ (Acker 1988: 86).

Another frequent practice of silencing, combining spatial separation with material deprivation, throughout this period was the sharing of blacklists of labour leaders. Such lists were shared both between company divisions ‘so that the other divisions can protect themselves against employing these undesirable elements’ (as cited in Bourgois 1989: 11–12) and between competing banana producers. Blacklist-sharing continued into the 1980s, both at the transnational level within United Fruit (Bourgois 1989: 12) and at the national level between United Fruit and its competitors (Frundt 2010: 105). As Sawchuk (2004: 229) has pointed out, even when it was difficult to prove whether blacklists actually existed, or who might be on them, ‘the widespread perception that the list exists has the very real consequence of helping to silence workers’ complaints’.

Shifting to secrecy and subterfuge in Limon/Bocas

In the early 1950s, the Limon and Bocas plantations began to rely on practices of secrecy and subterfuge, creating pro-management unions and paying their leaders



rather than prohibiting unionisation outright (Bourgois 1989: 9–10). In 1953, the division manager wrote to company headquarters that a man named Vargas was ‘employed to set up the labor union in this division ... his work has been entirely satisfactory to date’ (as cited in Bourgois 1989: 242).

Another form of secrecy and subterfuge was the use of company spies and infiltrators amongst the workforce. During a large strike on the Panama side in 1961, ‘a company informant ... attended secret meetings of the militant faction of the strike committee’, and the company managed to divide the ethnically diverse leadership (Bourgois 1989: 152–153). The company’s surveillance efforts went as far as to infiltrate a Guaymi indigenous rights organisation that was neither geographically nor politically directly connected to the plantation (Bourgois 1989: 147). Secret infiltration and spying persisted for decades: even in 1982, the plantation’s ‘ears in the ground’ had Philippe Bourgois himself reported to the company’s labour relations department within 48 hours of his first arrival to do fieldwork (Bourgois 1989: 12).

A year later, in competitive union elections, United Fruit resorted to another of subterfuge to manipulate indigenous workers into voting for the tame, pro-company faction: “the company printed flyers on red paper (the militant slate’s campaign colors) urging the workers not to vote for the white slate (the pro-management colors) on the grounds that ‘they are ignorant Indians’ ” (Bourgois 1989: 159). The indignant workers did precisely the opposite, and ‘the white slate swept the elections by one of the largest margins in the history of the Bocas division’.

From the 1980s, United Fruit found new partners in fostering docile, pro-company unions: churches. A church educational agency, the John XXIII Social School, or ESJ23 for short, promoted the notion of ‘*solidarismo*’: mutual comprehension between worker and employer. By the 1980s, *solidarismo* had become predominant on the Limon plantations, which, perhaps in conjunction with anticommunist propaganda, appears to have resulted in an absence of strikes (Sawchuk 2004: 143–146). But ESJ23 may not have been exclusively ideologically driven: United Fruit and other banana producers were among its donors (Sawchuk 2004: 155). Nor was worker support for *solidarismo* entirely voluntary. When arriving on a plantation, potential workers were asked to get membership of a solidarity association, or else get no contract, or no extension (Sawchuk 2004: 152). Pentecostal churches likewise supported *solidarismo*, Pentecostals were preferentially hired by banana companies, and Pentecostal churches on the plantations were in turn financially supported (Sawchuk 2004: 140). Through the use of these intermediaries, workers were prevented from voicing discontent, not through silencing, but through a mix of subterfuge, indoctrination and exploitation of economic insecurity. ESJ23 teachers were also involved in spying: they shared information with the banana companies about ‘which workers ask questions deemed to be unsupportive of company and solidarista aims during training sessions’ (Sawchuk 2004: 153).

Shifting towards secrecy and subterfuge: broader patterns

United Fruit’s response to a Honduran strike in 1932 displayed a mix of the old reliance on silencing by security forces and a first experimentation with secretly bribing union leaders: United Fruit’s Honduran director ‘bribed the organizing secretary of



the strike committee, got from him a secret list of leaders, and passed it on to [General] Cisneros, who had the men arrested and deported' (Acker 1988: 82).

By the 1940s, on the Tenguel plantation in Ecuador, United Fruit had resorted to the subterfuge of organising competitive elections between two union factions, while 'neither group seriously challenged the company'. Both ultimately answered to a union leader named Macini, who would publicly rile up the workers and make demands, most of which would be acceded to by management. It took years for the workers to realise that it was a performance, and that Macini was in the company's pay (Striffler 2002: 53–54). But reliance on pro-company unions could be a double-edged sword: they could emancipate. In Honduras in 1954 for instance, the CIA advised negotiations with the non-communist SITRATERCO union. While SITRATERCO's initial negotiating behaviour was ambiguous (see MacCameron 1983: 101–102 and Alexander 2008: 134–135, for conflicting assessments), it developed into the most successful national banana union in the region (Alexander 2008: 145; also Frundt 2009: 101, 147, 178), and continued to negotiate collective bargaining agreements with the company for decades to come (Cooper and Quesada 2013: 40–41). Even in repressive post-coup Guatemala, United Fruit's establishment of a 'company union' took a surprising turn: after some years, in 1959, the union sought to engage in genuine collective bargaining (Alexander 2008: 241).

In order to alleviate this risk, the company could infiltrate and spy on unions, as it did for instance in Tiquisate, Guatemala in the mid-1940s (Forster 2003: 212). Or it sowed division between different factions. On Costa Rica's Atlantic coast in the early 1950s for instance, a plantation manager called in a Communist trade unionist from a neighbouring plantation to settle his dispute with his own non-Communist union, successfully relying on the depth of suspicion between them, such that the arbiter would take the company's side (Alexander 2008: 51).

Configurations of actors and practices

While there were still times and places (Guatemala after 1954; Uraba, Colombia from the 1960s; Limon in 1982) where the United Fruit Company could count on the deployment of state violence to silence workers, it gradually came to recognise that it had lost routine access to this resource. During this period, United Fruit still used massive firings to silence workers and break up organising, and in some instances foreign workers were deported. But the old practices of silencing workers through physical force, material deprivation and spatial separation was increasingly supplemented by practices of secrecy and subterfuge.

In doing so, the company relied on a dynamic configuration of allies who could help shape a docile workforce: indigenous leaders and organisations, churches, and last but certainly not least, pro-management unions. The company set up its own unions or quasi-unions such as *solidarista* organisations, it spied on and infiltrated more independent union organisations, and it manipulated ethnic, ideological or religious differences to play workers off against each other. Thus, United Fruit attempted—with ambiguous results—to create tame or counterfeit versions of workers' collective voice and to confuse banana workers about how and by whom their



collective interests were represented. The aim was still the same: to disable voice and disable access to information and communication networks so as to avoid having to deal with an overly demanding and hence costly workforce.

Misleading workers and transnational coalitions: promising, reneging, shape-shifting

Turn of the century context

By the late twentieth century, the conditions that had enabled exploitation of banana plantation workers shifted, making certain authoritarian practices less viable, and others more attractive. The socio-economic context was still one of poverty and under-employment. Recent decades have been marked by economic downturns throughout the region, political violence in Colombia and Guatemala, and hurricanes in Central America.

While the mid-twentieth century had seen national-level trade unions flourish, from the late 1990s, banana plantation workers began to find new transnational forms of organising and allies in their struggles with the company, with the Limon and Bocas divisions once again at the centre of activity (Frundt 2010). Faced with renewed expansion of the banana sector, the Limon Catholic diocese had begun to take a vocal interest in the environmental and health impacts of expansion, the loss of land by small farmers, and the exploitation of workers (Sawchuk 2004: 167–170). Unlike in most of Costa Rica where *solidarismo* had taken hold, ‘in indigenous Sixaola, near the Panamanian border, workers affiliated with Chiquita’s Panamanian division retained union status and asserted new demands’ (Frundt 2010, 105). A church-led union/small farmer/environmentalist alliance called Foro Emaus was established ‘to halt uncontrolled banana expansion in the Limón and Sarapiquí regions’ (Frundt 2010: 106; also Sawchuk 2004: 173–174). In the early 1990s, the alliance began to develop transnational links with NGOs, visiting Northern Europe to raise awareness about both environmental and worker rights concerns (Frundt 2010: 110).

Meanwhile, Chiquita had been working with the US NGO Rainforest Alliance to improve its environmental image since 1992 (Frundt 2009: 75–77), but Foro Emaus and its European connections undercut these reputational gains. At the same time, Chiquita was challenging the exclusion of ‘dollar zone bananas’ from the European market, making reputation in Europe of crucial importance for the company (Cooper and Quesada 2014: 9). In the European market, moreover, some consumers were willing to pay a premium for ‘fair bananas’, which entailed good labour conditions as much as environmental standards (Frundt 2009: 40, 43–47; Cooper and Quesada 2013: 9).

In 2001, Chiquita made a historic U-turn in its labour management: it signed a Global Accord with Latin America’s regional banana union network COLSIBA and with the International Union Federation, recognising trade unions and labour rights as laid down in the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, and undertaking to ensure its independent suppliers would do so too (Frundt 2009: 137–138).



By signing the Global Accords, the company had to some extent tied its own hands in terms of dealing with organised labour: Chiquita became the most unionised of the banana multinationals (Frundt 2009: 137–138; Cooper and Quesada 2014: 10). Moreover, the unions had made huge strides in terms of their information and communications networks: organised workers were now in touch with the regional union organisation COLSIBA as well as with North European and North American NGOs. Becoming aware of threats or dismissals against vocal workers within days, even hours, and deploying the company's fear of reputational damage, COLSIBA and the NGOs could 'attack the transnationals at the scale at which they operate', and get workers reinstated (Hough 2012: 257). At the same time, the state lost its importance as a regulatory space, partly through a neoliberal abdication of state responsibility and partly because the Global Accord provided a framework for direct engagement between transnational worker representatives and company headquarters, cutting out state agents and national-level arrangements.

Continuities in silencing in Limon/Bocas

Even after the signing of the Global Accords, the company still occasionally resorted to its hundred-year old practice of silencing workers by simply firing those who sought to organise and collectively improve working conditions and wages. In September 2004, a Chiquita subsidiary attempted to get a one-day strike declared illegal, and nine trade unionists were dismissed, eventually sparking a complaint to the ILO (ILO Interim Report 2007). In 2006, unionised workers at the Sixaola plantations were fired, and labour leaders raising complaints were in turn terminated. Workers also reported a return to the use of *solidarista* associations to keep them in line (Frundt 2009: 152–153).

Broader continuities and shifts in silencing practices

In Uraba, Colombia at the turn of the century, the company had a violent ally committed to repressing worker activism, but it was not a state organisation, although links to the police and military have been alleged. The Uraba region was an exceptionally violent context for the company to operate in. From 1986, after infiltration of the unions by guerilla organisations FARC and ELN, hundreds, if not thousands, of unionists were assassinated, by right wing paramilitaries (Chomsky 2007: 100–106). Chiquita subsidiary Banadex infamously paid the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) 1.7 million in protection money between 1997 and 2004. However, it is somewhat doubtful whether the company was actively driving the violence against trade unionists (see Stylianou 2016, for such an argument), especially since so many had been killed before company payments began. Chiquita eventually withdrew from running its own plantations in Colombia altogether in 2004 (Chomsky 2007: 109).

Even beyond Colombia's very particular circumstances, a shift towards independent producers generally gave the company more leeway to deny responsibility for the sometimes violent hostility of these producers towards trade unionism. In Guatemala



for instance, where a major shift to independent suppliers took place, the co-founder of a worker's union was shot dead by an unknown assailant on the independently-owned Olga Maria plantation in 2008 (Frundt 2009: 145).

Firing workers for labour organisation continued to occur, especially by plantations that were not company-owned. This happened in Sarapiquí, Costa Rica, for instance, where complaints about dismissals and other violations were ignored by the 'very corrupt' inspector from the Ministry of Labour (Frundt 2009: 141). At the same time, as will be discussed below, transnational alliances had altered the playing field for the company, making the practice of silencing through dismissal more precarious.

Shifts towards new practices of secrecy and subterfuge in Limon/Bocas

Between 2001 and 2005, Costa Rican unions were 'generally content that the company had allowed open access to organizers' (Frundt 2009: 139). However, whether the company had never been sincere or whether the banana market proved too volatile to sustain Chiquita as a premium ethical brand, the Global Accord did not mark a consistent transformation in worker relations. In Bocas del Toro, Chiquita resorted to a new 'market-based' subterfuge that ostensibly gave workers greater autonomy, but actually left them more powerless: it transferred some of its land to a workers' cooperative, but when workers refused new working arrangements, it simply reduced its purchases from the cooperative, so that workers could not be paid (Frundt 2009: 147, 238).

Broader shifts towards new practices of secrecy and subterfuge

After the signing of the Global Accord, firing labour activists came to carry considerable reputational risk for the company. When such lay-offs gained publicity, Chiquita repeatedly leaned on its suppliers to rehire the workers, in Honduras in 2002 (Frundt 2009: 109, 235) and again in 2005 (Frundt 2009: 178), and in Costa Rica in 2007 (Frundt 2009: 152). The company found new subterfuges to disable workers' voice that relied neither on physical force nor on spying on, bribing or manipulating unions. Instead it made activist workers jobless without actually firing them. In Armuelles on the Pacific coast of Panama, responding to repeated labour actions, it transferred 12 plantations to a large workers' cooperative in 2003, and signed an agreement with it. However, the workers soon faced bankruptcy and unemployment, and the trade union filed complaints with Panamanian authorities arguing that there had been a 'corrupt transitional contract' (Frundt 2009: 104, 147, 238).

An even more important subterfuge to avoid the effects of unionisation on profits without repressing or co-opting unions outright was the increasing turn to independent suppliers. Globally, Chiquita shifted the balance of its supply between 2001 and 2013 from 70% Chiquita-owned plantations and 30% independent suppliers to the reverse. Even within its own plantations, discrete—and controversial—activities such as pesticide application were increasingly outsourced (Cooper and Quesada 2013: 16–17). While the Global Accord formally



gave Chiquita responsibility even for the labour rights situation on supplier plantations, it was still easier for the company to plead ignorance about the firing of workers outside its own plantations (Frundt 2009: 144).

This may not have been the sole reason for Chiquita's retrenchment from plantation ownership—in Honduras for instance, the extensive destruction caused by Hurricane Mitch was an important proximate cause—but increased deniability coupled with reduced overall unionisation were undoubtedly the effect (Cooper and Quesada 2013: 41). After another hurricane in Honduras in 2005–2006 for instance, when negotiations with a new union on the Buenos Amigos plantation broke down, Chiquita eventually sold the plantation with a condition that worker rights must remain recognised, but the new owner reneged on that commitment (Frundt 2009: 148).

The company also disabled flows of information and communication to and from auditors connected to the Global Accord with new forms of subterfuge. In Sarapiquí, Costa Rica, workers reported that, for the sake of external appearances, 'the managers pretend that a free union exists', but 'once the auditors are gone, this pretense disappears'. At other plantations, active unionists would be sent to far away locations on the plantation during audits, so they could not be interviewed (Frundt 2009: 141, 151).

Configurations of actors and practices

In one context, in Colombia, a Chiquita subsidiary was allied with a paramilitary group, but this proved to be a financial and reputational disaster. The company ended up having to plead guilty to the felony of making payments to a terrorist organisation and paying a \$25 million fine (Reuters 2007). Incidents in which the company was clearly associated with violence against workers became a rarity because of the legal and reputational risk involved.

Instead, the company developed a new spatial subterfuge to avoid having to deal with worker demands, by working extensively in very flexible configurations with independent suppliers. Where in the past it had removed activist workers from its plantations, now it removed itself from plantations where workers became too vocal and organised. These independent suppliers could more easily suppress unionisation and fire workers, and occasionally resort to physical intimidation, while the company had deniability. Or it sold land to newly formed workers' cooperatives, negotiating supplier contracts that could be reneged on if the workers became too demanding. Thus, the company constantly shaped and reshaped its labour supply chain.

Chiquita's constant shape-shifting interacted not just with market demand or competition forces, but also with the possibility of earning an 'ethical premium' for certified bananas at minimum cost. As the transnational union COLSIBA put it, a 'company can be certified in one country and benefit from the publicity of this certification in consuming countries for all its range of produce, while they misbehave in a neighboring plantation or shift plantations to non-unionized areas' (as cited in Chomsky 2007: 109).



Conclusion

Using a practice-focused definition of authoritarianism as an analytical tool, I have shown how a powerful multinational company could control and exploit its workers, using silencing, secrecy and subterfuge so as to sabotage accountability, for more than a hundred years. United Fruit's authoritarian practices vis-à-vis its workers occurred because they facilitated 'smooth business' and profit maximisation, but *how* these practices functioned was subject to variation and evolution, depending on the strategic needs of the company and the environment in which it found itself. Moving away from the national authoritarian regime as the only expression of authoritarianism leads to new discoveries about how authoritarianism actually functions in an empirical reality where the state is not the only powerful actor. In particular, I have shown above that there is an *information-blocking* aspect to labour exploitation by a multinational corporation. In order to keep its work-force docile, companies such as United Fruit and its successors need to sabotage their accountability to the workers: disabling workers' voice and disabling their access to information and communication. It did so through authoritarian practices of silencing and secrecy and subterfuge. The nature of these practices shifted over time, responding to altered scalar power dynamics between the company and its workers, and expressed in the company's always flexible but now also porous spatial manifestations, but the perceived imperative has remained unchanged.

Temporal continuities and shifts

Roughly three periods could be discerned in United Fruit's authoritarian worker management. Table 1 summarises the configurations of actors involved, and the authoritarian practices deployed, in each of these periods.

In the early decades of its life, the company could largely rely on the repressive capacity of its host states. Sometimes such capacity was bought outright, but more often it was the result of a normative alignment, whereby conservative national elites and their law-enforcement agencies agreed with the company that workers were to be kept in their place, not causing disruption, in the national and the company's interest.

As trade unionism became more legitimised throughout the Americas, the company began to rely on bribing, spying on, infiltrating, or manipulating trade unions or establishing pro-company *Ersatz* unions, as well as coopting indigenous and religious leaders and organisations. In more abstract terms, we can see this as a shift from silencing the workers to greater reliance on practices of secrecy and subterfuge.

By the end of the century, the company had to shift tack again, alternating between negotiating with and outwitting alliances between local workers and transnational union organisations and NGOs. Chiquita's strategies can be considered illustrative of a broader phenomenon. LeBaron argues that transnational companies rely on subcontractors precisely because it allows them 'to distance themselves' from the exploitative labour practices 'that are at best fueled, and at worst required,



Table 1 Configurations and authoritarian practices

Era	Configuration of actors	Practices
Early twentieth century	UF and police, military, governments; background actor United States government	<i>Silencing practices</i> – Shooting, jailing – Dismissal, eviction – Removal, deportation
Mid twentieth century	UF and some police, military, governments; CIA in Guatemala UF and pro-management unions, indigenous leaders and organisations, religious organisations	<i>Silencing practices</i> – Shooting, jailing (occasional) – Dismissal, eviction – Blacklisting – Deportation <i>Secrecy and subterfuge practices</i> – Bribing unionists, creating pro-management unions – Spying, infiltration, fomenting divisions – Coopting indigenous leaders and church organisations
Late twentieth/early twenty-first century	Chiquita and armed group in Colombia Chiquita and independent suppliers	<i>Silencing practices</i> – Shooting, jailing (rare) – Dismissal (occasional) <i>Secrecy and subterfuge practices</i> – Shift to worker cooperatives or independent suppliers – Deception of auditors

by their business model' (LeBaron 2014: 246). In other industries relying on subcontractors there is also concrete evidence of the use of secrecy and subterfuge to exploit workers. Chan and Siu (2010: 167) have shown how subcontracting to China allowed firms formally bound by codes of conduct to 'obfuscate the level of wages paid to workers'. And while Chiquita deceived auditors, in the Pakistani garment industry, Arslan (2020: 17) found that 'auditors have links with owners and audit quality is compromised'. Indeed, according to one auditor, the 'vast majority of social or ethical retail audits are 'not trying to find things out, they're trying to prove that something is not there' (as cited in LeBaron 2014: 245). The contribution of this article has been to conceptualise such practices as 'authoritarian', foregrounding their information-blocking functions, akin to accountability sabotage as practiced by authoritarian regimes.

Temporal continuities and shifts have been the main organising device of this article, as the most intuitive way of reading United Fruit's authoritarian practices. But of course, national authoritarian regimes also go through different periods of



existence, in which different strategies are required to sabotage accountability to citizens. The scalar dynamics between the company and its workers and the spatial dimensions of United Fruit's authoritarian practices are more distinctive.

Scalar dynamics

United Fruit and its successors always operated at the transnational level, frequently using telegraph communications in the early decades. Local managers may at times have taken autonomous decisions, driven by careerist motivations (Forster 2003: 212; Bourgois 1989: 123, 134), racist attitudes (Bourgois 1989: x–xi, 85–87, 128) or anti-communist paranoia (Bourgois 1989: 134, 147, 149, 204). But letters from the company archives (Bourgois 2003: 133–144) also show that orders to silence labour organising did sometimes come straight down from United Fruit headquarters in Boston. The general policy towards workers' voice and workers' access to information and communication either emanated from or was condoned by headquarters.

The transition from one time period to another *was* characterised by a scalar shift in the knowledge, networks and capabilities of the banana plantation workers. In the first period, while the company was transnational, the workers were trapped in the local sphere, or in Crane's (2013) terms, the industry, socio-economic, geographic, cultural and regulatory context in which they lived and worked was such as to enable extreme exploitation. Moreover, anyone who might 'educate' the workers in terms of labour rights and organising was kept away or separated from the plantations.

In the second period, the arena for confrontation between the company and its workers' demands became more national. The epitome and high point of this era is the month-long Honduran general strike of 1954, which started on the company's plantations (MacCameron 1983).

In the third period, workers have formed transnational information and communication networks. Their most important representation is through the regional trade union organisation as well as through NGOs, and their bargaining power emanates from the possibility of instant information flows within these networks as well as to potential consumers in European and American markets. However, the company has responded to this shrinkage of the distance between the workers and their transnational allies by deceiving auditors and through the shift to independent suppliers.

Spatial dimensions

The degree of physical control that United Fruit and its successors have typically had over their workers on the plantations, even in recent decades, was so pervasive that it can be readily compared to the territorial control of a national regime. But the nature of its territory was very different: rather than a single contiguous area, it has always consisted of a network of enclaves, loosely connected to each other and more tightly to 'headquarters' back in the US. Moreover, the plantation nodes of the network were extremely unstable: the company constantly acquired, abandoned, replanted its acreage, in response to plant diseases, market conditions, and indeed political circumstances including worker organising.



The ‘Octopus’ nickname that clung to the company in its early years is an apt metaphor in more ways than one. The original intent was to portray the company as a predator, its muscular tentacles reaching through much of Central and some of South America and capable of capturing and paralysing entire nations. But the continual movement of an octopus in the water is also an appropriate image for the extreme mobility of the company’s spatial articulation. A final feature of actual octopuses, applicable in part to understanding the authoritarian practices of United Fruit, is its distributed intelligence: the company could readily adapt its repertoire of practices, ranging from silencing through physical repression to secrecy and subterfuge, to different local political and regulatory conditions.

While the company provides an early example of the power in mobility attributed to transnational corporations from the late twentieth century (Gill and Law 1989; Koenig-Archibugi 2004), by the early twenty-first century, its spatial articulation has become not just mobile, but diffuse. At this point, the ‘octopus’ metaphor no longer holds, because the spatial boundaries between what is and is not ‘under the control’ of the company have become porous. While there is certainly still silencing of workers, the company’s responsibility for it cannot be straightforwardly read off from its spatial control over plantations. This spatial ambiguity itself has become a strategy for combining labour control and reputation management in an era of accountability struggles.

Future trajectories and implications

It would be wrong to assume that the current tempo-spatial and scalar configuration of accountability struggles between what is now the Chiquita company and its plantation workers marks an end-stage. In all likelihood, bananas will continue to be exported and eaten far away from where they were grown for some time to come. We may also assume that Chiquita, under whatever ownership, will continue to function as a profit-maximising entity, and that authoritarian practices of silencing and of secrecy and subterfuge will therefore continue to be attractive ways of curbing worker demands that might otherwise raise costs and affect profits. But the nature of these practices will continue to evolve in response to changing circumstances.

On the one hand, transnational corporations such as Chiquita may come under international legislative, rather than just reputational, pressure to become responsible for labour rights conditions by their suppliers. Germany and Norway have already adopted laws demanding due diligence in this and other areas of larger companies (IOE and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2021), and the European Commission has recently tabled a proposal for an EU-wide directive (European Commission 2022). On the other hand, trade unionism has long been in decline at the global level, many states are de-democratising and violence against civil society organisations is on the increase. For now, the latter two trends are not particularly in evidence in the states where Chiquita has its main areas of operation, but workers’ freedom to voice complaints and organise with safety should not be taken for granted.

It is not newsworthy that in global value chains such as that maintained by United Fruit and its successor companies, access to the wealth generated in the chain is by



and large denied to those at the beginning, or more evocatively ‘the bottom’, of the chain. Nor is it a novel finding that in order to do so, multinational companies have often sought to maintain friendly relations with authoritarian regimes, thereby sustaining such regimes. But the statist focus of comparative politics has withheld from view the ability of powerful actors such as transnational corporations to engage in authoritarian practices on their own initiative, in different alliances, regardless of the national regime type in which they find themselves. What is more, in order to adhere to the profit maximisation principle, they must continually reinvent practices of silencing and of secrecy and subterfuge to prevent workers from communicating with each other, organising and voicing dissent. It impels them to block upward surges of voice and downward flows of information in ever new ways so as to facilitate the upward stream of monetary profits to owners and shareholders.

Data availability Data sharing is not applicable as no datasets were created in this study. All empirical data can be found in the academic sources to which the article refers.

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