

**B Corps,
prefigurative politics
and speciality coffee:
nourishing
socioecological
change in the present**

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Sustainability standards in the coffee industry

B Corp certification

Sophisticated market alternatives

Explore Dark Woods' work in the Global South & Global North

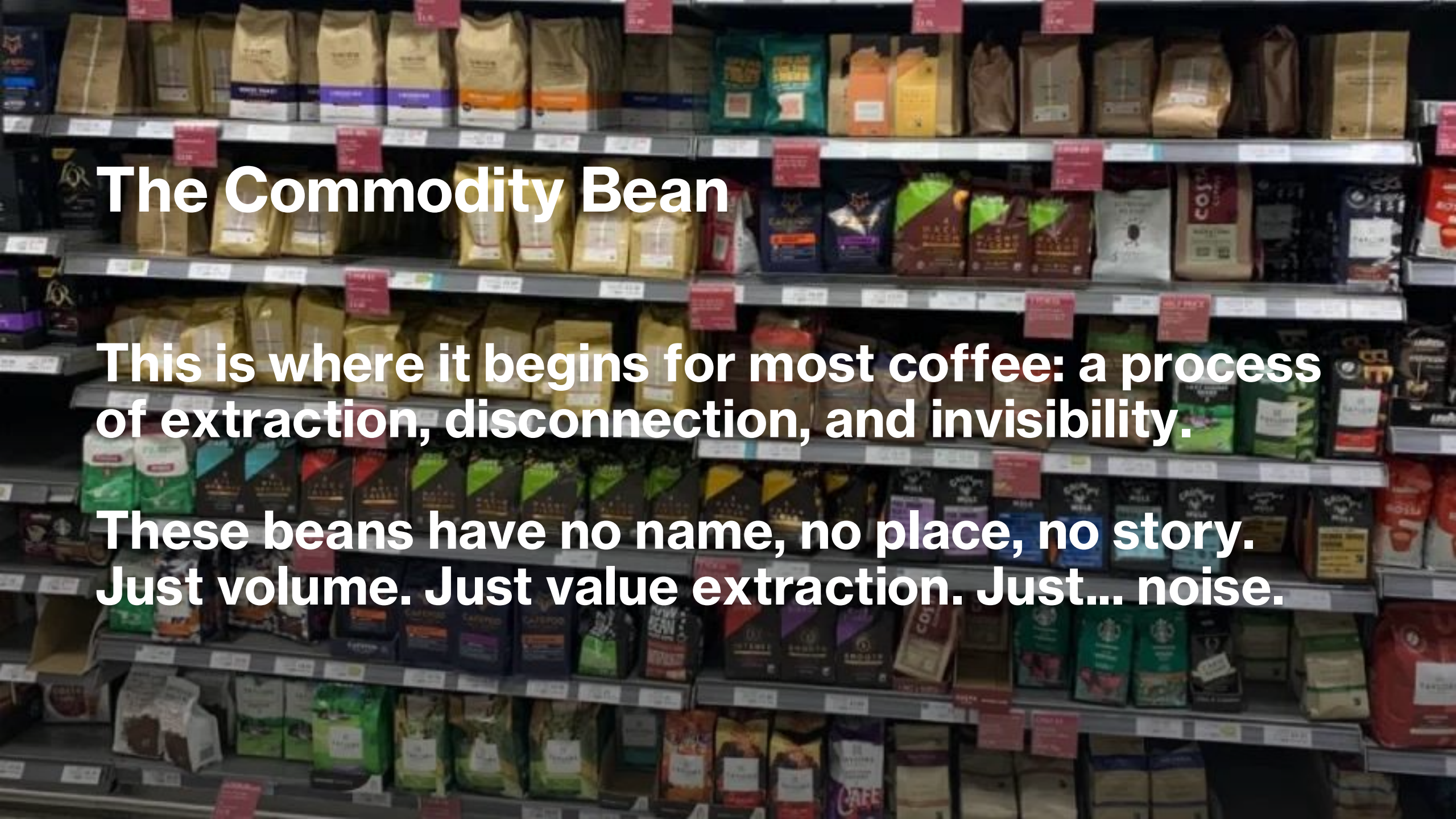
- When the **International Coffee Agreement** collapsed in **1989**, market-based governance and **voluntary sustainability standards (VSS)** such as organic and fairtrade gained traction.
- As these products were subsequently **mainstreamed** or **coopted** through corporate **CSR programmes**, market share for growers fell and **sustainability coffee standards** were **diluted** (Badger and Lambin, 2020)



Cafédirect packaging has moved away from showcasing coffee workers to emphasising sustainability claims, which is what most coffee companies do in their marketing strategies...



‘I’ve not seen a coffee company website or advertising in the last year that isn’t about ethical sourcing and sustainable packaging’



The Commodity Bean

This is where it begins for most coffee: a process of extraction, disconnection, and invisibility.

These beans have no name, no place, no story. Just volume. Just value extraction. Just... noise.

- In response to the **dilution of sustainability standards**, a small group of **specialty coffee roasters** started to adopt **new sustainability strategies** – single-origin sourcing, direct trade, and transparency, *terroir* (or place) – **to counter commodification**.
- By cutting out intermediaries, this group aimed to **access niche markets, improve agroecological practices**, and **earn higher prices** for farmers producers (Rosenberg et al., 2018).





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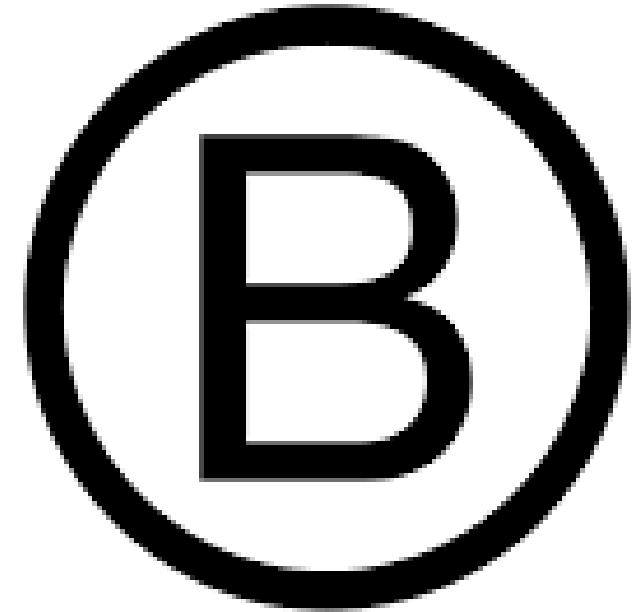
- As **coffee production has come under threat globally**, specialty coffee has also drawn interest from **powerful mainstream buyers in the Global North** – raising concerns about renewed producer exploitation.
- In response to this threat, a group of ‘**sophisticated market alternatives**’ (Kim & Schifeling, 2022) who emerged to evade cooptation are turning to **B Corp certification** to protect the values of the specialty coffee movement.

The average score for businesses taking the B Corp assessment is 50.9

80 is required to become a certified B Corp

In 2022, Nespresso became a B Corp by scoring 84

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The B Corp Standard is at Risk



06/15/2022

BY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

POSTED IN BLOG, FAIR FOOD, FAIR TRADE

An open letter to B Lab Global – link to sign: <https://forms.gle/wPZLGg1qVJUa5SKr6>

We, the undersigned Certified B Corps have joined together—with the support of certification watchdog, [Fair World Project](#)—because we believe the very mission of B Lab and the integrity and relevance of B Corp Certification is at risk.

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147.4

Dark Woods were initially certified as a B Corp in 2020 with a score of 99.6, which made them one of the first B Corp coffee roasters in the UK.

In 2024 they achieved a recertified score of 147.4, making them one of the highest scoring coffee B Corps in the world.



Dark Woods B Corp status is founded on:

- 1. The work they do *in* the communities where the source coffee in the Global South, and;**
- 2. The work they do in their home community in the Global North where they roast and sell coffee.**



In the GS, Dark Woods always pay farmers high premiums for their coffee. By working in this way, they argue that farmers are much more likely to adopt sustainable practices and reduce the unsustainable use of fertilisers and pesticides to increase production. This works they believe because farmers have a guaranteed income for their crops...





‘One of the reasons that we do so well with a lot of the awards is because we get access to stuff that other people just don't get access to. And the reason we get that is because we've worked hard to build strong relationships and friendships with... a lot of producers, which means... they send us stuff that they don't send anybody else.’





‘We may decide to refuse potential new partners based on their own ethics, but these are prices worth paying. Taking the long view, businesses which behave responsibly can be stronger, more profitable and better placed to deal with external shocks than those which adopt short-term, purely profit driven ideals.’





Dark Woods' willingness to question the practices of others is, I would like to argue, an example of the 'power to act otherwise' (Cooper, 2024).

It is an example of prefigurative action undertaken to bring about socioecological transformative change in the present!

The Journey to Source

In these ways, Dark Woods Coffee reconnect beans to their roots. Value is added, not extracted.

Communities are not silenced but supported, enhancing processes of *decommodification and decolonisation*.

Here, the story of a bean is no longer anonymous, it's a relational journey...





In the GN, Dark Woods sell 100,000s of bags of coffee annually. In 2022, they introduced plastic-free plant based 1kg compostable bags, which break down in a matter of weeks in a typical composter. The material is manufactured locally in Yorkshire, with huge carbon-savings overall, preventing 100,000s of coffee bags going to landfill every year.





Dark Woods use fibre drums for wholesale customers. Each drum holds 6kg of coffee, and is returnable, reusable multiple times & recyclable at the end of its life.

The cans are delivered & collected (full of waste) by cargo e-bike or electric vehicle.



About the same time, we ran on a COP26 legacy project for Dark Woods, which involved providing a sample of their retail customers with a composter for coffee and food waste. We also produced a composting guide with some compost subsequently used by local gardeners and food growers.





**This is prefigurative politics in practice,
building the world we want, now!**

**It's arguably a strategy of transformation
(Yates, 2020) for the specialty coffee
movement and business organisations.**

Interdependence

Locally, Dark Woods work with grassroots initiatives. Packaging isn't just sustainable, it's part of a living, thriving ecosystem.

Composting, education & interconnectedness...





‘I have no doubt that, if we focussed solely on maximising profit, we would be much wealthier than we are – we would be using cheap beans, cheap packaging and pay low wages. We would simply shout about green messaging like many others do, but focus on making as much money as we can.’

Some conclusions...

Dark Woods Coffee shifts value creation from **anonymous extraction to relational connection** – both with farmers & producers in the **Global South** and communities in the **Global North**.

B Corps like Dark Woods (**sophisticated market alternatives**) embody prefigurative politics by enacting the social and ecological changes they wish to see – **in the present**, not in some distant future.

This is not just about coffee – it’s about how everyday economic practices can **nourish socioecological transformation**. The bean becomes a medium for **justice, sustainability**, and **decolonial solidarity**.

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Thanks

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