



FAIR TRADE COFFEE?

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Fair-trade coffee as a product which is being produced and consumed within a complex of values such as ethics, economic disparity, geographical boundaries, political realities, and environmental considerations.

And this complex involves the largest consumers of coffee who live in the richer northern hemisphere of this planet, and the various growers of coffee who inevitably live in the poorer, and often impoverished southern hemisphere, such as, Mexico.

But it appears that fair-trade coffee has forced the consumer to make ethical choices about personal consumption, since eating can no longer be a neutral act – it involves a whole array of forces that must be negotiated before coffee can be poured into a cup.

In the area of food production, globalization has meant that an industrial model has replaced the traditional family farm. Food is no longer produced by a farmer, but by large conglomerates whose aim is to produce food on an immense scale in order to minimize cost and increase profit.

This means that the bulk of the food we eat is produced not by farmers but labourers or workers who simply tend crops on land owned by conglomerates. Even when small farmers do grow product, such as coffee, they usually must sell it to middlemen who are part of the conglomerate structure, since they have no other method to sell what they have grown.

And in this industrial structure, the profit is at the top-end; the worker in the field simply gets a wage. In effect, the very role of the family farm has been eradicated by this industrial model of food production, since the individual cannot access the marketing structures of the conglomerate food growing operation.

Moreover, by selling to the conglomerates, the individual farmer does not control the fluctuation of commodity prices that is the reality of trade when carried out in vast quantities. All too often, individual farmers tend to one-crop operations. For example, in North America, [most farmers grow corn](#) to be used as feed for the massive beef and dairy industries. Most farmers do not grow food that can be sold directly to consumers.

Food, as a result, is now produced in a highly centralized fashion, and distributed to the consumer by equally large grocery store chains, which also share the same corporate structure as that practised by the producers of food – namely, bulk production to lower production cost and increase profit.

Such vast structures in food production and distribution have led to dissent – those that see such structures as inherently unethical, in that the production of food has been taken away from the individual farmer and placed into the hands of food factories, for lack of a better term.

One such form of dissent is the “fair-trade” movement, which seeks to restructure the production and distribution of food (as well as other items) so that the family-farm can again be made important in the job of feeding people. Briefly, the fair-trade movement suggests that the “conglomeratization” of food production is inherently an ethical issue – that it is unfair that the money is made at the top-end of the food production chain, while those that actually get their hands dirty, literally, and cultivate the crops, see very little of that profit, other than their wages.

As well, this often meant that the imbalance further distanced the have and have-not nations of the world, with the haves being in the northern hemisphere and the have-nots being in the southern hemisphere. It was in Europe that this dissent first acquired a formal organization under the term, “[alternative trade organizations](#),” or ATOs.

The purpose of these ATOs would be to purchase goods from family-farms or farming cooperatives, more of than not in the southern hemisphere, and then establish a system of distribution of these goods in the northern hemisphere.

These ATOs would also do two things. First, they would get rid of the various middle-men who profited from food production by simply facilitating the movement of goods from source to consumer (such middle-men are part of the food conglomerates); and second, they would instil in the consumer the sense that eating, or consumption, is not a neutral act – it can either be ethical or unethical.

The point being that by consuming goods distributed by the conglomerates, one was enriching the rich, and therefore being unethical, while on the other by purchasing fair-trade goods one consumed ethically, by ensuring that labour was properly paid for, and profit shared in direct opposition to the tradition industrial mode – the bulk of it going to the bottom-end, that is, at the level of the individual consumer.

The largest fair-trade commodity, and the first to be handled using the ATO model, is coffee, which is a product that clearly highlights the level of economic disparity between the coffee consumer (almost always in the rich northern hemisphere), and the coffee grower (always located in the impoverished southern hemisphere).

This means that coffee has become an important cultural product, in which social values, economics, and politics have blended. Since the issues of economics and politics lie well beyond the scope of this paper (although they cannot fully be treated as bearing no influence on the topic at hand), the focus will primarily be on the social values that are set into motion each time a cup of free-trade coffee is drunk. And these social values are clearly demonstrated at the level of consumption.

Ethics is the most important value that comes to the fore. When a consumer sees the label “fair-trade

coffee" in the context of other, non-fair-trade coffee, there is a subtle manipulation at play.

The consumer is being told that free-trade coffee is not a product of the conglomerate, the immense "coffee factory." Rather, by purchasing fair-trade coffee, the consumer is being asked to support a structure that markedly works against the conglomerate. In other words, the consumer is being made aware of an important fact – that spending money is not only a form of personal acquisition – it is also an ethical act – that money must be spent in such a way that it gives equal value to all.

There is a big difference between the terms "value" and "profit." On an immediate level, "profit" lies at the heart of the industrial model and is intimately linked to another important term, "growth." Industry needs to continually grow in order to maintain its profitability.

This is why there is always a stress on growth, so that the one year must show greater gains than the previous year. Not showing such gain means stagnation – that one year is as same the as previous. "Value," on the other hand, means involves an altogether different emphasis. Instead of "growth," the stress is on "sustainability" – the notion that production should be maintained at a certain level.

Sustaining the livelihood of an individual farmer carries an entirely different set of assumptions than growth and profitability in industry. Therefore, the consumer is asked to contribute, by purchasing fair-trade coffee, towards sustainability – and at the same to walk away from the industrial model.

However, this choice becomes a complex one when retailers who are conglomerates themselves become involved. For example, what does fair-trade coffee become when being sold at Starbucks? And is sustainability possible if large retailers demand more and more fair-trade coffee? Or the danger that the profit model will be re-manipulated?

Perhaps in response to this involvement of large retailers, there has been a further refinement of fair-trade coffee – namely, "shade coffee," which is coffee grown beneath the canopy of forests, since the coffee plant is shade-loving. Shade coffee has brought the issue of the environment in the choice that the consumer must make. And sustainability means not only sustaining the individual farmer, but sustaining the environment.

The opposite of shade coffee is sun coffee which is a plant that has been genetically altered to yield a higher crop. But, sun coffee requires cleared land that then needs to be heavily fertilized.

Sun coffee is having a devastating effect on the environment – it is contributing to the disappearance of various species of birds. Shade coffee, on the other hand, uses traditional approaches to growing coffee beneath trees and is therefore environmentally friendly, as it encourages biodiversity, and is often grown on family farms.

Since shade coffee needs the canopy of trees to grow, the participation of large retailers in marketing and selling shade coffee will mean greater environmental sustainability, since trees will not have to cut down.

But will this mean the small coffee farmer can also be sustained? It would appear that slapping ethical labels on food is part and parcel of our continuing moral decline - we want to be good, but we no longer know how to be good - and this opens us up to all kinds of economic exploitation.

The photo shops, "Automat," by Edward Hopper, painted in 1927.

