



Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research  
Revue canadienne de recherche sur les OBSL et l'économie sociale

Vol. 2, No 2  
Fall / Automne 2011  
pp. 104 – 106

## Book Review by Gretchen Hernandez

**The Fair Trade Revolution.** *Edited by John Bowes.* London and New York: Pluto Press. 2011. 257 pp. ISBN 9780745330785

*The Fair Trade Revolution* is a compendium of writings about the experience, impacts, and challenges of Fair Trade. The goal is clearly to promote the practice of Fair Trade as a way to address the fundamental problem of extreme income inequality in the world. The authors are people directly engaged in Fair Trade organizations and businesses and see it as a key component in constructing economies founded on ethics.

Fair trade, as most know, is based on paying a fair price for products made in the South (poorer countries) by consumers in the North (richer countries). Instead of mainstream market logic—paying the lowest possible price—ethical consumers often pay a higher price for Fair Trade labelled products, knowing that the producers will receive a fair price for the good. Fair Trade has further developed to include practices such as guaranteed pricing (setting a price for the year so that producers can plan ahead), paying in advance for imports (recognizing that credit is more readily available in the North), and fair wages for products that use hired labour. There tends to be environmentally considerations as well—Fair Trade often also implies organic or improved environmental practices.

The book devotes one section to “producers,” one section to “consumers,” and one section to “future challenges.” The producers’ section includes three chapters on the specific experiences of small-scale producers in Latin America and Africa. This section could be improved by having someone from a producer country write directly about their experiences; nonetheless, the writers do bring the people to life—Maria Soveida in Peru, Jorge Ramirez in Ecuador, Oliver Kishero in Uganda, for example, emerge as robust and three dimensional protagonists of Fair Trade.

The section on consumers includes two chapters on the role of Northern consumers in starting up the Fair Trade model in the UK. *Campaigning for Justice* recognizes the role of Oxfam campaigners, through relentless efforts, to get towns to commit to buying Fair Trade products whenever possible, resulting in the “Fair Town” movement that now includes 500 towns or cities. *Honesty, Openness and Social Responsibility* describes the role of the Co-operative Group in bringing Fair Trade to the mainstream market in the UK. A more unusual and interesting chapter is the *Banana Breakthrough* in which Matt North describes his experience as a buyer for Sainsbury’s (a UK-based supermarket chain), moving from conventional purchasing, to learning about Fair Trade bananas, to supporting small-scale producers directly. According to North, Sainsbury’s is now responsible for selling over half of the Fair Trade bananas in the world and has further expanded to Fair Trade tea and sugar.

A large emphasis of the book is on highlighting the many positive dimensions and impacts of the Fair Trade movement. Nonetheless, the authors also recognize some of the problems. In *The Greatest Challenge*, Jonathan Rosenthal acknowledges that the entry of massive companies like Walmart and Starbucks into Fair Trade has brought a proliferation of Fair Trade certification organizations, some of which clearly do not embrace the full range of ethical values and practices. In *Tricky Waters*, author Tomy Mathew confronts the environmental and food security implications of producing consumer goods like chocolate and bananas for Northern consumers, instead of growing food for local consumption. The issue is not only one of transportation and overuse of hydrocarbons, she argues, but rather poses the question as to whether this is the best way to ensure access to adequate nutrition for communities, to maintain the health of soils, and to protect natural areas and wildlife. The acknowledgement of these issues lends credibility to the book.

The quandary of large corporations adopting Fair Trade products is also explored. In the chapter, *A Glass Half Full*, Croft and Cole describe the dilemma that emerged when Cadbury decided to “go Fair Trade.” There are two dimensions to the issue. The first is that Fair Trade producers are small scale, whereas demand from companies like Cadbury is enormous. The second issue is whether or not the high ethical standards of Fair Trade can be maintained when multinational corporations get involved. To achieve the supply levels needed, and to sustain these levels, Cadbury became directly involved with farmers in Ghana, investing in education and technical assistance. The authors highlight that Cadbury has always considered itself to be “principled”; back in 1879 when the company was founded; the Cadbury brothers built housing for their workers, and introduced pensions and paid leave. The trade off between ethics and greater markets is evident nonetheless in this example; Cadbury has obviously expanded the market considerably for small-scale cocoa producers, but the chocolate is not organic, nor is the quality of Fair Trade chocolate by pioneers like Green and Black.

A positive aspect of the book is its focus on producers from the South as proactive instigators of Fair Trade. There is a tendency however to over-emphasize the role of consumers in the North in establishing and promoting Fair Trade. This book recognized that producers have been organizing and fighting for years to achieve better trade conditions, and that it is their ongoing daily commitment that makes the movement possible.

Further, some of the key challenges to Fair Trade are not meaningfully explored in this collection. First, despite the expansion of the Fair Trade market, it is still a very small percentage of the overall consumer market. Most consumers will still choose price over other considerations. Second, Fair Trade creates a parallel market, which necessarily remains marginal. If anything, Fair Trade highlights how unethical all other products are. Some would argue that efforts should be put instead into developing ethical production and ethical sources for all products. That we should move away from mass production of useless goods to quality production that may cost more but also pays more to the worker or producer, and has less of an environmental footprint. A third issue is the cost of Fair Trade certification. It simply remains out of reach for most small producers in the world to become certified. The question also remains as to whether or not they should put their time and investment into reaching niche markets (organic, high quality) rather than labelling.

The book does make a strong case for the fact that this movement is very young. The 1990s was a time of social organizing and awareness building for Fair Trade. Only since 2000 has Fair Trade begun to spread, geographically, organizationally, and in terms of volume of sales. This speaks to the potential to continue improving the model and perhaps eventually resolving some of the associated problems.

*The Fair Trade Revolution* is an enjoyable read. The chapters read as stories; they have flow, they have energy. As a collection of experiences of the history, actors, and current situation of the Fair Trade market, it is a valuable contribution to social economy literature.

**About the author / L'auteur**

**Gretchen Hernandez** is a PhD Candidate in Geography, and Research Associate at the Centre for Sustainable Community Development, Simon Fraser University, BC, Canada. Email: [gretchen\\_hernandez@sfu.ca](mailto:gretchen_hernandez@sfu.ca)