

# Who cares about Fair Trade? An introduction to the *Journal of Fair Trade* and the Fair Trade Society

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## Why Now?

We are launching *The Journal of Fair Trade* and the Fair Trade Society at a pivotal time of stress and disorientation in the global movement for fairer terms of trade and internationalism. After a stretch of half a century of effort, Fair Trade ideas and practice have reached and engaged many people, consumers and producers, both large and small businesses, as well as governments, non-governmental institutions and research institutions. However, there are deep schisms and countervailing notions of what is justice, redress and fairness in trade. Fair Trade is perhaps being eclipsed by other concepts: sustainability and transparency, for example. Yet, these ascendant propositions lack justice and equity in their DNA. At the same time, even Fair Trade believers appear to lack a full view and understanding of the differentiations within Fair Trade, their significance and origins, and what is (still) regressive and unfair. We can only manage to overcome this through a platform dedicated to trying to achieve this.

We envisage the Fair Trade Society and the *Journal of Fair Trade* as a platform for ideas and guidance on how to get it right. We want to create the links between thought and action to steer Fair Trade into maintaining its catalytic and transformative role in all of our societies. A Fair Trade Society that owns the *Journal of Fair Trade* is a new idea here: a membership organisation with the intention of uniting people who care deeply about what is good and fair and who want to challenge and redress wrongs. The ultimate purpose then is simple but heady: to discuss, define, debate and help to support a reboot of our movement for the next decades, calling out those who need that spur to change and transform themselves and documenting and underpinning the efforts of those who are leading the way. We hope many of you will join the Fair Trade Society and help us, contributing your voices and ideas.

Challenging and passionate commentary on the essence of fairness, empowerment, engagement, values, alternative economics, ethics and the very redefinition of economic success and sustainability will all be found in our journal pages and in discussions on the Fair Trade Society website ([www.joft.org.uk](http://www.joft.org.uk)) in the years to come. In the road travelled so far, and the one ahead, no special significance is given to 'Fairtrade', 'Fair Trade', 'Fairly Traded' or other variations of spelling, despite the contest for meaning between these terms. For simplicity of purpose alone, then, we are using and deliberately reclaiming the term 'Fair Trade'. Why?

First, inequality pervades our world. It affects all aspects of our societies through disparities in income; access to justice; rights; opportunities for education and advancement; and the basic necessities of food, water and dignity in life. The quickening embrace of sustainability in trade does not try to reach or encompass what is fair. Sustainability ignores history and redress. Fair does this. The synonyms of fair tell the story we want to promote through the Fair Trade Society and the *Journal of Fair Trade*: just, equitable, fair-minded, open-minded, honest, upright, honourable, trustworthy; impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced, non-partisan, non-discriminatory,

anti-discrimination, objective, neutral, even-handed, dispassionate, disinterested, detached; and above board, lawful, legal, legitimate, proper, good.

Second, Fair Trade seems, in part, to be a reflection of prevailing norms and social instincts. The early years of alternative and Fair Trade were a time-bound combination of the then values of basic social conscience, the dropout, the refusenik, the boycott and buycott, arguments for autonomy, post-colonial liberation, of solidarity, trade-not-aid, new consciousness and mobilisation of purchasing power.

The specificities of the progressions of different parts of what was, in its initiation, a movement around the world show us many things about the modifications over time that we have seen in the Fair Trade/Fairtrade concept itself. The concept of Fair Trade has broadened in its appeal and means many things to many people. The idea of Fair Trade has indeed been taken up in whole and in part by other forces for change, including major companies and sovereign states. This has produced tension, debate and division.

For many actors, Fair Trade still has power and potency. For others, perhaps Fair Trade has not delivered. Most producers remain outside its reach and lack opportunities. Consumers want large companies to do more and show more commitment over time, not less, but when they do, they perceive those efforts as being mainly on their own terms. Environmental protection and the urgency of addressing climate change impacts and drivers do not appear at all to deliver systemic adjustment to production, distribution and the organisation of economies. However, notions of fairness, or a sense of justice and even redress through trade, have almost been eclipsed in our discourse, overtaken by other themes: sustainability, private-sector leadership, multi-stakeholder engagements, supply chain controls, 'transparency', regulation, ethical codes and, still, audit.

Like many other movements driven by a radical (root) purpose, Fair Trade may yet, perhaps, be remade now even as the ideas are broadened. Those who specifically wish to may prevent continued corporate capture and retain or reboot the fundamental principles and challenge to the economic status quo that made Fair Trade so catalytic in its early years. What is clear is that Fair Trade principles and vision have a critical role ahead. This stems both from the movement's visionary and radical beginnings and the compelling need to sustain and magnify discussion about the lack of equity in trade and, for far too many, the harsh and hopeless worlds and lives of work. There can be no question about the increasingly unequal power relationships between buyers and sellers, employers and workers, and the social woes and wide-ranging disenfranchisements that result. Women and children remain the 'catch-all' social grouping bearing the costs (internal and external) of our punishing social and economic norms. And there are the 'old' but still central questions to answer on competition versus co-operation in the global economy, of ownership and voice, of determination and realisation of rights and responsibilities and of genuine accountability.

### **Why a Scholarly Journal?**

We – a diverse and global we – have achieved a lot. We have tried, failed, learned and innovated, and indeed we keep doing so. Thus, our new *Journal of Fair Trade* will aim to define and establish credibly and clearly what makes trade transformative, what is being 'lost' or 'diluted' in our challenging times and what strategies, new movements and coalitions may exist to support its resumption or reawakening, particularly in an age of deepening exclusions and nationalisms. Many specialist academic journals publish regularly on fair trade subjects including agriculture, law, business, ethics, development, politics, branding and marketing. There is no shortage of subject matter. Fair Trade cuts across many disciplines, geographies and human dilemmas. Globally, there are now diverse varieties of civic, social, political, single-issue and cause-related movements within, alongside, cannibalising or contributing to Fair Trade and the general visibility of trade justice.

The gradual institutionalisation of Fair Trade since the 1980s has produced increasingly complex questions of governance, ownership and leadership. This contributes to an environment of conflictive, diversifying ethos and perspectives. Fair Trade ideas and theses are being constantly challenged, atomised, co-opted or splintered. Some initiatives roll forward with a unity of principle that makes them greater than the sum of their parts (e.g. a core of 'early' Alternative or Fair Trade companies within the World Fair Trade Organization, Fair

Trade Towns and Cities, etc.), others are fledgling, fragile, more erratic or site-specific and space-specific (e.g. Fair Trade Universities, Fair Trade Campuses, Worldshops Day or go-it-alone social and 'model' businesses).

In the Global South, Fair Trade is very gradually showing itself as a movement concerned with both producing *and* consuming. So-called 'developing' or 'non-Western' countries that have adopted and are building Fair Trade marketing systems or initiatives include India, South Africa, Kenya, Mexico and Israel, where points of Fair Trade focus include the local economy, 'slow food' and producer-to-consumer co-operative or local markets initiatives. There are multiple – even countless – consumer 'assurance' and 'origin' concepts emerging, expressing values compatible with Fair Trade.

Together with more fluent and accessible information, these initiatives are all driving or supporting premium niche products, market segmentation and human connectivity. These marketplaces are, in turn, fed by supply chains and marketing chains that celebrate or leverage difference and otherness and accrue more value from having specific origins, demarcating the producers' gender, or ecological or traditional production systems and methods, particularly, but not exclusively in food. This broader supply landscape is not all Fair Trade (nor does it claim to be), but Fair Trade is a driver and fully part of this landscape (whether it fully realises it or not!). Among the proliferations of model, Fair Trade is one of the few schematics to celebrate collective organisation among the atomised hard-working people at the 'beginning' of every supply chain.

## What Is Ahead?

Within a span of fifty years, Fair Trade has become a multifaceted political and economic phenomenon, driving and catalysing change in the way business is done, how consumers consume and how producers produce. It is exceedingly comforting (and fascinating) that, in the end, so many disciplines are engaged in research on Fair Trade; on its meaning, realities and the change it works in the world. It is nothing other than exciting, too, that there are so many committed academics and activists at so many diverse institutions engaged in work around Fair Trade.

We know Fair Trade has acted as a catalyst for societal and commercial change. There is valuable work both done and to be done on when and how efforts for justice and fairness in trade have had an effect. However, we can be less sure about what can leverage the mighty and powerful to change their ways. There is even less evidence that Fair Trade supporters – a wide-ranging set of actors with varied motivations – aspire to leverage (further) systemic or fundamental economic change. Fair Trade may have actually become more of a purchasing habit and far less of a political statement or action calculated to reduce economic injustice. Many consequences of Fair Trade are emerging, some perhaps unintended. Some are quite hard to fathom, such as the presumed influences of empowered work and consumption on individual psychology, living a purposeful life and even on improved or worse health.

More recently, key actors in Fair Trade seem to have followed divergent schools of strategic thought and practice. The first might be defined as a move towards 'growth' and 'scale', with a concomitant dilution of underpinning values and the ability to target and support the weakest and most vulnerable. The second might be termed 'issue sensitivity' and 'opportunity sensitivity'. This means following and adding to the Fair Trade 'portfolio' new areas of work or products of objective significance representing important 'gaps', such as artisanal gold, or gender division and the continued relegation of women to the lowest-paid jobs and positions in the (local/global) economy. These separate areas of focus make forming a single view of Fair Trade even more complex. Our challenge is not small: how can this all be reconciled in a coherent narrative around Fair Trade and its impact and best practice?

## Fair to Whom? Fair How?

The main task of the Fair Trade Society and the *Journal of Fair Trade* is objectively but passionately to discuss, debate and answer critical questions. At what point can we say that Fair Trade is fair, and fair to whom? Fair Trade has yet to be fully understood and gauged as being fully equitable, empowering and transformational.

The content and meaning of Fair Trade may be adaptive, but the systems available to deliver it appear less so. How can we really be certain that a developmental, economic/business-driven and moral system like Fair Trade is managing and prioritising needs adequately or functioning as a dynamic system at all? Have producers gotten a fairer deal? Which ones? How? What else is needed?

If Aristotle was grappling with the concept of fairness 2,000 years ago, can fair be a meaningful concept in a modern world so replete with historic, poverty-entrenching injustices? Should we go back to find out? Should we look to anthropology and the variety of human experiences and attempts at creating fair societies/economies to know this? There seems to be work to do to 'connect the dots' and understand the patchwork of impacts – good and bad – of Fair Trade and other initiatives with transformational and ethical claims. And, perhaps hardest of all, we need to do all this *with* and not *for* the producer protagonists in this story. For this reason, the *Journal of Fair Trade* aims to be a collaborative venture from top to bottom, involving academics and practitioners, producers and businesses of all types, sizes and philosophies.

Perhaps, we need to look more deeply into the trajectories of those who were not able or willing to join the movement or those who did but who have since broken faith with it. There are some missing questions, perhaps, too. How has Fair Trade impacted on self-esteem and self-actualisation among small-scale producers? Did it help those previously excluded from the market? What did the embracing of mainstream business into Fair Trade deliver? Can we establish and document what was really lost, lost for good or not worth having anyway? Have we really only seen microcosms of good work? So many questions: easy to pose, less easy to answer definitively.

## **Marginalisation and Control**

There was always plurality in the Fair Trade movement: apolitical, good folk and churchgoers all working (unwittingly) together with private capitalists, socialists and social democrats. As the formalisation of the semantics of Fair Trade has advanced, however, there is a blurring of meaning and growing conflict. One size does not quite fit all any longer. This is why people are asking cogently about whether or not it matters (i.e. do standards rise or fall?) when there are competing assurances and values systems around the Fair Trade concept. Fair Trade has done much to change the system(s) and perspectives (accountability) of large corporations. It has certainly changed their language and discourse. But what has Fair Trade done to address those constructs – market domination, Intellectual Property (IP) capture and control, colonisation, gender divides, class and social stratification – that further marginalise small-scale producers? Has Fair Trade done enough on this? Is it capable of more? Are producers really any less excluded than before? Has Fair Trade actually empowered people yet? Whom? Or are workers and producers spoken about and spoken for, but still not heard or able to voice their own interests and concerns, even as good folk continue to work in their name to advance and understand Fair Trade?

## **What Is Being Published?**

This introduction is not a literature review or a gap or competition analysis. (I started one, but when I got to sixty-two journals publishing on Fair Trade/Fairtrade and variations, I stopped.) Currently, there is both a wealth and a dearth of published thought on Fair Trade. There are informal academic groups and many universities that promote and host Fair Trade-related work. There are also wide-ranging, passionate Fair Trade and human rights movements and publications that operate outside academic journals but on the 'front line', as it were. Most Fair Trade academics have their publishing 'homes' in key journals such as the *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, but the citations/mentions and the range and type of publications is quite staggering and varied, with some specifically anti-capitalist publications. There are many tracks and streams of work and working groups around Fair Trade: Fair Trade certification systems, governance, change agency, environmental and ecological topics and more. There are numerous case studies and comparative studies across a range of subjects worldwide (e.g. means of production, distribution, marketing strategies, sectors such as coffee/citrus and producer impact). But what do case

studies on different forms of distribution and ownership from Japan and Korea to the United States and the United Kingdom and the advancement of Fair Trade tell us about strategy and competition? Is there just one 'mainstream' market from now on? What linkages can be made between thought, experience and action to steer Fair Trade – or at least parts of it – towards maintaining its catalytic and transformative or revolutionary role in all of our societies? From this challenge comes the motto of the Fair Trade Society and the *Journal of Fair Trade*: Action ≈ Learning ≈ Theory ≈ Justice.

### **Why a Dedicated, Progressive and Challenging *Journal of Fair Trade*? Why a Fair Trade Society?**

The goal of the *Journal of Fair Trade* is not to 'fill a gap' per se (by itself) but rather to co-ordinate and push for a clearer and more questioning voice on the fundamental trajectories of business and the meaning of Fair Trade as a business practice and as an economic/political and social change movement. Around us, we can now see economic justice being increasingly redefined in nationalist, exclusive, xenophobic and racist terms, and we can expect trade policy and public perceptions to shift within our lifetimes. Our journal needs to provide cogent responses and answers to this phenomenon.

The challenge is this: Can we develop a journal that is both historical and futuristic? Can we ensure that it speaks with voices that are not traditionally heard and delivers, as net results, first, an inspiring view of Fair Trade's potential and, second, motivational support for transformative innovation? There is not an obvious place to go to find critique or 'bar-raising' articles and scholarly work about Fair Trade. There is a need to 'join the dots' sometimes, to promote more collaborative work and to disseminate work and learning. Sometimes existing writing, being done in different areas, could benefit from being grouped together and (re)analysed. New combinations and connectivities of experience and ideas are vital. Once again, we lack a full view and understanding, and we can only manage this through a platform dedicated to trying to achieve it.

So, what is the platform? The *Journal of Fair Trade* is beginning as the product of a new Fair Trade Society that owns the journal and exists to support it and to help active thinkers and doers to engage and own the process. Joining the Society does one obvious thing: it provides you with digital access to the journal for free. But, more than this, Fair Trade Society members own the Journal. As such this, too, is an ownership statement. Fair Trade Society members will not always agree, but that is fine. The important unifying principle is a commitment to transformative trade, building undisputed best practice to share, to inspire and to sustain pressure for change for the next fifty years.