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## Bringing the “Moral Charge” Home: Fair Trade within the North and within the South

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**BRINGING THE “MORAL CHARGE” HOME:  
FAIR TRADE WITHIN THE NORTH AND WITHIN THE SOUTH**

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**Abstract:** Fair trade is typically understood as an alternative market system that aims to right historically inequitable terms of trade between the geopolitical North and South and foster more direct producer/consumer linkages. We suggest that a more expansive application of the term “fair trade” to encompass agro-food initiatives within the North and South has considerable analytic and practical utility. We profile five such initiatives in the United States and two in Mexico. The U.S. undertakings are best understood as “proto-” fair trade projects that frame their work principally as an effort to preserve “family farming” rather than as an exercise to achieve fairness in the marketplace. The Mexican initiatives more explicitly embrace the certification-criteria-labeling model of international fair trade. Both, we conclude, hold potential to harness fair trade’s “moral charge” to improve conditions for small producers and laborers in North and South experiencing most directly the negative effects of economic globalization.

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**BRINGING THE “MORAL CHARGE” HOME:  
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*Food goes into every human being. Though it is not easy to explain or describe clearly, the intuition that one is somehow substantiated - incarnated - out of the food one ingests can be said to carry some kind of moral charge.*

Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* (1996)

*The needs of small farmers, whether they grow coffee [in the South] or produce [in the North], may be quite similar. Both groups need better access to and more control over the market. That can only happen if consumers use their market power to vote for fair prices to the grower, better access to financing for small farmers, and more environmentally sustainable production.*

Rink Dickinson, Co-Director, Equal Exchange (2000)

There is probably no human society in which food has not been seen to carry the “moral charge” to which Sidney Mintz refers. How and why certain foods come to be imbued with characteristics that make them either taboo (e.g., the abominations of Leviticus) or sacramental (e.g., taro among Polynesian peoples) is a matter of considerable interest. As an example of this linkage of foodstuff and morality, Mintz (1996: 72) describes the efforts of late eighteenth century British abolitionists to undermine the institution of slavery by arguing that consumption of sugar, produced as it was by slaves, was tantamount to murder. Such deliberate ethical valencing of a particular food for social or political (or, now, commercial) purposes is a more or less modern phenomenon. Certainly, this active and relatively transparent construction of the moral charge is a defining characteristic of what has come to be known as the “fair trade” movement.

Fair trade is typically understood as an alternative market system that aims to right the historically inequitable terms of trade between the geopolitical North and South. It is founded on the notion that some consumers will select certain foods based on the ethical characteristics they are seen to embody. Fair trade thus links Third World producers of primary tropical foodstuffs more directly with socially responsible consumers in industrialized nations. It is in that nexus that Raynolds (2002:404) locates the “true significance” of fair trade: “its ability to create new consumer/producer links which span the North South divide.” Those links – socially embedded as they are in shared “values of solidarity and fairness” (Renard 1999: 496) rather than in the values of the market – are important, in turn, for the “challenge they raise to the abstract capitalist relations that fuel exploitation in the agro-food system” (Raynolds 2000: 298).

While fair trade has to date been framed exclusively as a system linking Third World producers of primary tropical commodities (coffee, bananas, cocoa, tea) more directly with socially responsible consumers in industrialized nations, Raynolds’ “progressive new consumer/producer links” (2001:1) are precisely what many sustainable food initiatives *within* the United States and *within* the global South are also intended to achieve. A number of Northern undertakings share many of the structural elements that are characteristic of international fair trade, and a few such projects have begun explicitly utilizing the rubric of “fair trade” to frame their approach to building agro-food sustainability. There are, moreover, sustainable food system initiatives intended to forge relationships between producers and consumers that are entirely endogenous to countries of the South. These, too, exhibit a close kinship to what is conventionally understood as fair trade. In this article we suggest that a more

expansive application of the term fair trade to encompass agro-food initiatives *within* both North and South as well as *between* North and South has considerable analytic and practical utility. Fair trade, we argue, is not necessarily *far* trade.

The recent burgeoning of studies on alternative agro-food networks in Europe and North America has taken the “turn to quality” as its *leitmotif* (see especially the collection of essays published in *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, 2003). David Goodman (2003: 2) notes that this literature has utilized three principal analytic categories – quality, embeddedness, and the local—in its explorations of alternatives to price/market hegemony in food systems. With few exceptions, however, issues associated with equity have not been systematically engaged. We suggest that the Northern and Southern fair trade initiatives profiled here, all of which attempt to mobilize some version of “fairness” as a means of connecting producers to consumers, offer the new category of “equity” to those interested in understanding and assessing the “turn to quality” in markets for food products.

We share Raynolds’ belief that fair trade, wherever one finds it, may indeed mount a fundamental challenge to the domination of the agro-food system by powerful corporations and the straitened ethics of the neo-liberal market. Not everyone is so sanguine, however. Forms of “green consumerism” have been faulted for eschewing social mobilization and direct political action in favor of the contradictory promotion of social change through consumption (Allen and Kovach 2000; Klein 1999; Winter 2003). Critics of fair trade, though not unappreciative of its progressive potential, have pointed out a variety of questions that must be addressed if fair trade is to realize its transformative promise. These concerns include the privileged position of

farmers as opposed to waged labor, the accessibility of fairly traded products to low income consumers, the robustness and character of the ethical linkages established across social and physical space, and the extent to which such linkages actually become the foundations for broader social or political challenges to the conventional global agro-food system and the overarching set of corporatist and capitalist relationships in which that system is embedded.

Goodman and Goodman (2001: 114) posit the challenge succinctly:

... the alternative trade movement must find ways of incorporating low-income consumers into its networks, while maintaining its commitment to price premiums and long-term contracts for producers. Moreover, fair trade organic must extend its reach beyond the nutritionally rather insignificant commodities of coffee and chocolate, and enroll large-scale retailers and socially excluded consumers into a more broadly based coalition, which prioritises its political commitments.

Just as these concerns apply to fair trade between North and South, they are also applicable to our exploration of the manifestations of fair trade within Northern and Southern spheres. We suggest that these projects and undertakings are uncovering possible routes around and through such contradictions. Notably, the explicitly *social* content of fair trade's "moral charge" is a critical element that may allow fair trade – between *and* within North and South – to assume an important role in the struggle to achieve a food system the sustainability of which is predicated on both social justice and ecological integrity. Assessing the manner in which concerns for equity engage participants in alternative agro-food networks can illuminate the extent to which such networks might fulfill their promise as transformative vehicles, rather than fall prey to tendencies toward "defensive localism" (Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003).

## **What's Fair is Far: Tapping Into the Moral Charge in International Trade**

The unfairness of international terms of trade between Northern centers and Southern peripheries – “unequal exchange”— was long the focus of dependency theory and its many variations (Amin 1976; Roxborough 1979), and today remains a key element of the contemporary debate over globalization (Greider 1997; McMichael 1996). An enduring feature of North/South trade relations has been the displacement of small and independent producers by export crops and the subversion of their economic position by cheap agricultural imports.

From at least the days of the British abolitionists who rejected slave-produced sugar, there have been people of good will unwilling to accept this state of affairs. The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s saw the birth of a wide range of “alternative trade organizations” (ATOs), small businesses or civil society organizations, primarily in Europe, that established a network of shops to sell products from small or poor producers in the Third World who had no markets (handicrafts), were trapped in inequitably structured markets (e.g. coffee), or whose markets had been closed by political fiat (e.g. Nicaragua). The volume of fair trade and the number of participants engaged in that activity became large enough to take on “movement” status in popular and academic accounts. The cry of this nascent movement, which emerged from progressive development NGOs, was “trade, not aid” (Renard 2003: 89).

A watershed event for the fair trade movement was the creation of the Max Havelaar label in the Netherlands in 1988. The Dutch development organization Solidaridad was approached by Mexican coffee farmers from the UCIRI cooperative in Oaxaca state, who were seeking to expand markets for their product beyond token sales through European “world shops.”

Solidaridad created a fair trade label, which could be placed on coffee sold under any brand in mainstream retail venues (Renard 2000). Max Havelaar licenses the use of the label to coffee roasters and retailers who agree to be certified for their compliance with its criteria of fairness in trade. The label, somewhat like its eco-label counterparts on organic foods, is intended to conduct to the prospective purchaser the “moral charge” the coffee can be understood to carry as a result of the conditions of its production. The rapid growth of fair trade organizations in Europe during the 1980’s and the U.S. during the 1990s, and the creation of an international certification body in 1997, reflect the degree to which this form of alternative trade is being institutionalized.

The core principle of fair trade initiatives is obtaining a “fair price” for Southern producers’ goods by making commodity chains both shorter and fairer. Through alternative trade networks that bypass traditional intermediaries, small farmers and producer organizations are able to reap as much as 40 percent of the final purchase price. But fair trade organizations make it clear that the connectivity they hope to foster between Southern producers and Northern consumers goes far beyond the narrow objective of price. According to TransFair USA,

Fair trade benefits many. From farmers in producer countries to students in a U.S. school studying the environment, the concept and practice of fair trade connects producers and consumers in new and powerful ways. It is the nexus for: meeting both environmental and economic considerations of indigenous peoples; re-balancing the trading relationship between North and South; building a link between U.S. policy and publics to a larger world community that is knocking at the door (2002: 1).

Raynolds’ assertion that fair trade “suggests provocative possibilities for socially re-linking production, trade, and consumption and challenging the domination of the agro-food system by



oligopolistic transnational corporations” (2001: 1) may appear hyperbolic, but this is precisely what fair trade organizations intend.

In order to receive fair trade certification, these production arrangements must meet specified criteria. While various fair trade organizations phrase the standards somewhat differently, Table 1 lists the most commonly used criteria drawn from a variety of fair trade schemata. Producers typically must receive a guaranteed minimum or “floor” price to cover production costs and protect against market fluctuations, as well as a “social premium” directed to social development. Other criteria include providing credit or partial payment in advance of harvest, long-term trading contracts, financial transparency, environmentally-sound practices, and increased control by producers over marketing and production (Fair Trade Federation 2000). Fair trade certifiers have also developed a second “modality” to certify fairness in crops such as bananas and tea, which are produced largely on plantations by waged workers. These standards include payment of a “living wage,” decent working conditions, and respect for the right to join unions (Pruyn 2001). Coffee was the first fairly traded food commodity and remains the most significant, with 240 producer organizations now on the international fair trade coffee register, representing 490,000 grower families. Certification has now expanded to other products, including bananas, tea, sugar, cocoa, honey, and orange juice (Theunissen 2002; Rice 2001). Worldwide sales of certified fair trade products grew 22 percent in 2001 to reach \$235 million, benefiting 800,000 families. Fair trade bananas, coffee and chocolate have captured an important share of the market in several western European nations (FLO 2002a).

However, it is not yet clear whether fair trade as currently constituted can become more than a marginal alternative and assume a role as a real force for the reform, and even transformation, of conventional unequal exchange relationships. It is this issue that most concerns David Goodman and Michael Goodman in their review of the “social imaginaries” of organic agriculture, eco-labeling, and fair trade. Progressive change requires a “symmetrical socio-ecological” conceptualization of sustainability that facilitates political engagement (Goodman and Goodman 2001: 115). Yet the current technocentric, standards-based construction of “organic” and of most eco-labels ignores the social conditions of production, and these manifestations of “sustainability” are coming to approximate conventional agro-food systems in their patterns of farm structure, labor organization, and marketing (Guthman 2000). In contrast, Goodman and Goodman (2001: 111) find fair trade labels to be uniquely potent since they encompass “both organic production processes and the bundle of ethical labour and commercial practices which encode alternative eco-social production relations into the constitution of these products.” The fair trade network’s eco-social imaginaries, they assert, offer a deeper, richer, and more radical promise of transformation.

We argue that the bundle of core elements that constitute fair trade are not found only in the international arrangements to which the term is conventionally applied, but can also be applied to the activities of some alternative agro-food networks *within* the North and *within* the South. If fair trade can indeed facilitate action at such a distance that it creates a moral and a material connectivity across continents, should it not also function similarly across shorter distances? If fair trade is so compelling and engaging a discursive construct for socially

embedding Dutch consumer behavior in regard to Mexican coffee, might it not function similarly in shaping the choices a Wisconsin consumer makes in buying cheese, or the way a resident of Mexico City decides to purchase tortillas?

These questions so far have not been engaged by the literatures on contemporary agro-food transformations. Fair trade has been treated as a special and somewhat idiosyncratic case within the larger set of alternative/sustainable food problematics. This is somewhat curious, since the features of fair trade initiatives intersect with the key analytics of place/locality, social embeddedness, and quality. But studies of the construction of short food supply chains in Europe (e.g. Marsden et al., 1999; Miele 1999) do not reference the parallel efforts of Third World fair trade producers to circumvent intermediaries and jump-start rural development. Analyses of the social embeddedness associated with alternative and direct marketing of foods have not foregrounded considerations of equity, even as fair trade coffee is sold at farmers markets alongside local produce. The intense examination of “quality” now under way does not substantively encompass “fairness” as a means of framing preferences (Goodman 2003; Winter 2003).

As Whatmore and Thorne note, “performance of ‘fairness,’ rather than charity” is a powerful means of establishing “connectivity” between peasant and indigenous coffee producers in the South and consumers in the North (1997: 299). This performance is also at work in a number of initiatives both within the North and within the South. Exploring the construction and deployment of “fairness” on these more limited terrains is both theoretically and practically useful, and we now turn our attention in this direction.

### **North/North Initiatives: Convergence?**

One of the defining features of economic globalization is that it ties together the fates of people at opposite corners of the earth in new and complex ways. In the second of the two quotes that open this article, Rink Dickinson, co-director of Equal Exchange Coffee, highlights the similarity in the structural position of many farmers in both the North and South. His comment describes a project called Red Tomato, which brings the produce of southern small farmers to New England grocery stores:

The Equal Exchange warehouse houses organic coffee from peasant farmers in Oaxaca, Mexico. It houses watermelons from disadvantaged, black farmers from Georgia, South Carolina, and other parts of the south. Both the watermelon and the coffee farmers have created co-ops to arrange marketing and give them a chance against larger growers and processors. The implications of this convergence between the work of the watermelon farmers, peach farmers, tea growers, and coffee farmers is immense (2000: 2).

In this structural and institutional “convergence,” Dickinson explicitly sees an opportunity for “bringing fair trade ideals to U.S. farmers” and for developing fair trade marketing in local, regional, and national contexts as well as in the international frame.

How might we assess Dickinson’s ambition? Are there indeed extant or emerging initiatives focused on marketing within in the United States that might plausibly fall under the rubric of “fair trade?” In fact, there is a variety of such undertakings in all regions of the country. In order to provide an empirical platform for further discussion, we now profile five of these initiatives, with particular attention to the extent to which these endogenous projects share characteristics commonly associated with North-South fair trade (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

**Most Common Fair Trade Criteria**

- Fair prices to producers; fair wages to laborers  
(floor or minimum prices/wages, social development premium)
- Advance credit or payment to producers
- Democratically run producer cooperatives or workplaces
- Long-term contracts and trading relationships
- Environmentally sustainable production practices
- Public accountability and financial transparency
- Financial and technical assistance to producers
- Safe, non-exploitative working conditions

(Sources: Global Exchange 2002; Equal Exchange 2002; FLO 2002b; TransFair USA 2002; Fair Trade Federation 2002)

**Red Tomato**

Red Tomato is a marketing organization based in Canton, Massachusetts that distributes fresh fruits and vegetables from family farmers to retail supermarkets, food cooperatives, and institutions in the Boston area. If there is one initiative that might be expected to approximate the South/North fair trade model most closely, it is Red Tomato. The project was started in 1997 by Michael Rozyne, who had earlier been a founder of Equal Exchange. From direct conversations with staff, it was apparent to us that fair trade principles undergird Red Tomato's approach to facilitating market access for small, sustainable farmers. But apart from a

commitment to assuring a “fair price” and to the establishment of “long-term pricing agreements,” these principles remain largely implicit in the organization’s public face. Indeed, the words “fair trade” are almost completely absent from Red Tomato’s public materials and point of sale advertising. The only use of the term in its principal brochure comes in a description of its sibling, Equal Exchange.

Dickinson (2000: 2) explicitly outlines the similarities in the roles of Red Tomato and Equal Exchange:

Both groups are committed to connecting consumers to farmers. Both are actively engaged in the marketplace but are not for profit maximizing. Both Equal Exchange and Red Tomato are working with disadvantaged producers, and both are driven by cultures of worker innovation and control.

Nevertheless, Red Tomato has quite deliberately chosen to frame its public message in terms more familiar to North American consumers. According to its brochure,

Red Tomato is a nonprofit marketing organization that helps family farmers survive and helps make sure that local people can find high-quality, affordable, local produce. (Red Tomato, n.d.)

Rather than the formal certification and labeling characteristic of South/North approaches to fair trade, Red Tomato has chosen to develop a “brand” of its own, and that brand image does not include an explicit fair trade element. By way of explanation, a Red Tomato staffer distinguishes between “following fair trade principles versus certifying or using fair trade principles to certify.” She is “very comfortable saying Red Tomato follows fair trade principles,” but feels that many consumers in the United States are not now sufficiently informed or well enough developed politically to respond to a formal fair trade campaign focused on domestic produce and American farmers (Red Tomato 2002).

## **Federation of Southern Cooperatives**

Ironically, fair trade *is* foregrounded by the Federation of Southern Cooperatives. That organization is partnering with Red Tomato to bring to the New England market the watermelons and other produce grown by African-American family farmers in seven Southeastern states. This marketing relationship with a democratically run cooperative represents another of the ways in which Red Tomato's practices correspond to those found in South/North fair trading arrangements. But where Red Tomato prefers to accent the family farm/localist/environmental dimensions of its product line, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives makes an unambiguous effort to deploy the moral charge of fair trade in its outreach. A Federation press release (2000:1) describing the relationship with Red Tomato is headlined "Federation/LAF Engaged in 'Fair Trade' Practices to Serve Family Farmers and Customers" and states:

Our goal at the Federation/LAF is to make sure farmers are treated fairly in the marketplace. We want 'fair trade' for farmers—one that first considers the farmer's costs and profit. [...] we hope it will serve as a model for family farmers across the country.

The Federation/Red Tomato project directly addresses concerns familiar to the Latin American and African coffee farmers with whom Equal Exchange is accustomed to dealing: the power of distributors and retailers; the desire for collective action by producers and for closer linkages with consumers; the need for long-term contracts and, of course, for a fair price:

The Federation/LAF first asked the farmers what they considered to be a fair price for their watermelon. Once that was determined all their costs were factored in above the farmer's price, such as transportation and other overhead costs. The Fair Trade model considers the farmer first and foremost and by eliminating the "middleman" the consumers also have a more direct relationship with farmers which is a win-win situation for all concerned (Federation of Southern Cooperatives 2000: 1).

The Federation, then, clearly sees the “convergence” referred to by Dickinson and appreciates the potential of domestic fair trade, directly mobilizing the language of fair trade to illustrate both the disadvantages its members face and the route to improving their situation.

### **Family Farmer Cheese**

Family Farmer Cheese is a joint project of the Wisconsin-based dairy farm advocacy group Family Farm Defenders (FFD) and a cheese manufacturer, Cedar Grove Cheese. Founded in the 1970s, FFD has long been actively involved in struggles to reform federal milk marketing regulations and pricing policies, oppose the new biotechnologies, and counter agribusiness consolidation. Recognizing that efforts to influence federal legislation were important but slow, the organization sought ways to keep small dairy farmers in business in the short run. Family Farm Defenders’ leadership met with a local cheesemaker whose small, family-owned factory was one of the few surviving facilities in what had once been a thriving regional industry. According to FFD founder Francis Goodman, “We decided to market a cheese brand based on a fair relationship between trading partners, providing consumers an opportunity to vote for family dairy farms with their food dollars, and providing family dairy farmers financial security” (Leinberger 1999: 1).

The critical foundations of the Family Farmer Cheese initiative are a guaranteed price for milk and a label. All cheese sold under the Family Farmer Cheese label is purchased from farmers at \$16 per hundredweight (the market price at the time of writing is around the \$9 level). Milk is purchased from individual farmers and from the Scenic Central Milk Producers Co-op, another project of FFD. Farmers selling to the project must agree not to use recombinant bovine growth hormone, to use sustainable methods of farming, and to care for animals in a humane way. Family Farm Defenders and Cedar Grove cheese share marketing and distribution



responsibilities, and the cheese can be purchased by mail and through retail food cooperatives and natural foods stores throughout southern Wisconsin.

The capacity to pay a fair price to farmers ultimately depends on the willingness of consumers to pay a premium price for the cheese at retail outlets. This willingness is engendered by the cheese's distinctive label and by other educational and outreach materials. The Family Farmer Cheese label does not refer to fair trade, or even fairness. It is distinctive, however, in its linking of farmers, consumers, *and* processor:

Family Farm Defenders is a non-profit organization composed of small family farmers and concerned consumers. By choosing Family Farmer brand you become part of an alliance working toward a safe sustainable food production system. Our milk comes from small dairy farmers who use no artificial growth hormones. (Family Farmer Cheese 2000)

Family Farm Defenders is comprised of non-farm citizens as well as farmers, and the organization takes a more systemic perspective than is commonly encountered in alternative food initiatives. Family Farm Defenders' mission statement emphasizes not the virtues of local consumption, but the possibilities inherent in mobilization for democratic practice:

We adhere to the principle of democracy by empowering farmers to speak for and represent themselves in the quest for economic justice and responsible sustainable agricultural policies...the Family Farm Defenders is dedicated to speaking out against all the forces threatening the long-term survival of rural America and to preserving a diverse, safe and wholesome food supply at an affordable price for consumers (Family Farm Defenders, n.d.).

### **Midwest Food Alliance**

The initiative that most closely resembles the characteristic criteria-certification-labeling arrangement of international (South/North) fair trade may be that of the Midwest Food Alliance. The Alliance has established a set of "Guiding Principles" which it uses as a framework for

formal third party certification of producers of meat, fresh vegetables and fruits. Farm operations that conform to the guiding principles may use the “Midwest Food Alliance Approved” seal to market their products. The Alliance is engaged in an extensive program of consumer outreach and education as it attempts to make a place for Alliance-labeled products in supermarkets in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

Though the superstructure of the Alliance program is similar to the “traditional” fair trade model, certain core elements of that paradigm are missing. That the organization’s literature and web site make no reference at all to “fair trade” is not necessarily surprising, given the lack of engagement of all the U.S. projects with that particular terminology. But the Midwest Food Alliance also avoids an appeal to the need for a “fair price” or to the survival of small farmers. Indeed, in Alliance materials it is even difficult to find use of the term “family farmer,” so liberally deployed by the other initiatives we have reviewed. Not only does the Midwest Food Alliance use the unqualified term “farmer,” it also focuses more attention on the sustainability of particular production practices than on the survivability of particular kinds of farmers. Farms should be “profitable,” but that profitability is understood and presented by the Alliance as a function of effective presence in the marketplace and in the demands of consumers, and not as an ethical or rights-based claim to a particular price. While the project works hard to create market access for the farmers they certify, the Alliance provides no floor price, long-term contracts, advance payment, or credit.

The Midwest Food alliance is considerably less “farm-centric” than the other initiatives profiled here. And paradoxically, perhaps because of that orientation, the project finds it

appropriate to include the interests of labor and the wider community in the guiding principles which shape its certification process. In addition to eight principles relating to agronomic and conservation practices, farmers certified by the Alliance must adhere to the following social axiom:

Providing safe and fair working conditions for our employees and our families:  
For example, we develop farm policies in order to establish open channels for communicating workplace safety and satisfaction... We incorporate quality of life issues into our daily decision making process for ourselves, our families, our employees and our broader communities (Midwest Food Alliance n.d.)

Without seeing the individual farm plans that must be drawn up for certifiers, it is difficult to know how such generalities translate into concrete actions. Still, inclusion of what the Alliance calls “human resource development” in its criteria is an important step toward a version of North/North fair trade that envisions justice for social sectors beyond the “family farm.”

### **UFW Fair Trade Apple Campaign**

If the Midwest Food Alliance has begun to address the interests and concerns of agricultural workers, the Fair Trade Apple Campaign of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union actually privileges labor as the project’s point of departure. The UFW is well known for its efforts on behalf of farm workers—particularly the California grape boycotts—and has long sought to connect consumers to workers’ struggle for just treatment in the nation’s fruit and vegetable fields. The UFW’s base in Latino farmworker communities and its involvement in cross-border labor solidarity give the term “fair trade” an appealing resonance for the UFW, and the organization is explicit in terming its nascent initiative the “Fair Trade Apple Campaign.”

The apple industry is a highly globalized market. Imported apples from Chile, New Zealand, and South Africa now compete intensely with those grown in Washington and other states. Washington's family growers, still the large majority of apple farmers, are besieged by a combination of forces. Consolidation in packing and distribution, retail sourcing practices favoring the largest growers, and delays of 12 to 18 months in payment for their fruit have eroded growers' market power and pushed them into debilitating debt cycles (Jarosz and Qazi 2000: 5-6; Gamboa 2002). Growers receive only 11 percent of what consumers pay at retail, even though the retail profit margin on apples is 32 percent, higher than for virtually any other grocery item (UFW 2001).

Squeezed from above, small family apple growers often pass the pain on to their workforce. The state's apple workers—over 80 percent of Mexican origin and often undocumented—take home an average yearly salary of \$7,654, far below the poverty line (Jarosz and Qazi 2000; BCGEU 2001). In both orchards and packing houses, unions say that workers face discrimination, are denied the right to organize and bargain collectively, and do not enjoy health and safety protections guaranteed by state law (UFW 2001). Indeed, the Washington apple industry today remains 100 percent non-union (Gamboa 2002). Rather than focus their attention solely on labor's immediate employers, unions hoping to organize apple workers identify the structural dynamics hurting both growers and workers:

The U.S. agricultural community grew and prospered on the values of a "fair return" for those who risk the most and a "decent wage" for a hard day's work. Today's new global economy threatens to erode these values even further. The apple industry is unfair... Smaller, family-owned farms are going bankrupt because corporations pay less per box than it costs growers to cultivate and harvest their crops (BCGEU 2001).

Accordingly, the UFW is launching its Fair Trade Apple Campaign as an “economic collaboration” with family growers and grower collectives that “uses consumer pressure on retailers to pay growers more for their fruit” (BCGEU 2001). Having identified the growers’ entrapment in a cost-price squeeze as the root cause of workers’ problems, the union hopes that rather than pitting growers against labor, both will gain if family apple farmers were to receive a fair price. Guadalupe Gamboa, the UFW’s National Vice President and director of the apple campaign, insists that workers’ resentment for their poor conditions is not directed principally at family growers:

[It] is mainly against the packers, the companies, who are the worst abusers of workers. The problem in the past is that family growers have identified with the big companies. We’re trying to break that by showing them that they’re more like the workers, because they don’t have any say in the price they get (2002).

The fair trade apple campaign will label apples produced under this grower-worker collaboration with the UFW’s black eagle symbol (Paynter 2001). The seal will be conditioned upon growers’ entering into collective bargaining agreements with the UFW, guaranteeing better wages, health and safety guarantees, and respect for basic labor laws (e.g. workers compensation). In return, the union hopes to offer small growers volume buying, long-term contracts, and better and more consistent prices by bypassing distributors and negotiating directly with major grocery chains interested in the seal. The fruit will initially be sold in the largest west coast cities—including Seattle, Sacramento, San Francisco and Los Angeles—viewed by the union as “solidarity markets” (Gamboa 2002) where recognition of the UFW and sympathy for farmworker issues run high.

Rather than setting a minimum “floor” price as in fair trade coffee, the fair trade apple initiative centers upon a living wage and respect for labor rights, much like the “plantation

modality” of the international fair trade movement. The UFW is asserting that such rights are central to the trading equation. The union draws parallels between fair trade apples, fairly traded coffee and international anti-sweatshop campaigns, all of which seek to reform “unjust” practices in their respective industries through consumer education and pressure.

### **South-South Initiatives: Inclusion?**

A key question in realizing the promise of fair trade initiatives to generate greater social equity and justice is their inclusiveness. If access to fair trade markets is constrained by entry barriers, such as quality standards or competition between producer groups for limited market demand, the movement’s transformative potential will be limited. Goodman and Goodman (2001: 115) frame clearly the challenge posed by the quality issue:

...while fair trade organic has opened up “spaces of inclusion” for small-scale producers, the dictates of “quality” act as an exclusionary force at odds with the relational ethic of the movement. Many producers, typically the poorest in both resources and natural endowments, even if they can meet the costs of organic certification, may be excluded from the network because of the strict quality standards imposed by importers and suppliers.

In addition, producing for high-value global niche markets brings both opportunities and a new set of demands and complexities for rural producers (Ericson 1999). These markets, with their concomitant demands for product consistency, quantity, quality and timely delivery, and pressures to adapt to fickle consumer tastes and styles, can pose threats to community well-being and cohesion, particularly in highly traditional and indigenous communities.

The potential for exclusion, assert Goodman and Goodman (2001: 115), extends to the sites of consumption as well as production:

...the premium attached to fair trade organic [products] makes them high-priced luxury items, out of reach of the everyday purchases of lower-income consumers. Nor is there much consumption of these products in either the local or regional Southern contexts of their production [...] new institutional mechanisms will be needed to promote more socially inclusive patterns of sustainable consumption.

However, there are emerging fair trade initiatives located *within* the global South that provide provocative responses to these very problems, and pose a challenge both to the conceptualization of socially conscious consumerism and to the balance of power within the fair trade movement. Some of the most promising of these initiatives are taking place in Mexico, and we turn now to examining two of them.

### **Comercio Justo México**

Mexico was the birthplace of the international fair trade movement in its current form. The original fair trade seal - Max Havelaar - was created in response to the request of organized Mexican coffee producers for access, on equitable terms and in significant quantities, to European markets. For the first time, “fairly-produced” commodities were traded with sufficient volume to generate real social benefits for small farmers. Under these fair trade arrangements, some coffee and honey producer associations have realized improvements in social and economic conditions for their families and communities (Pruyn 2001).

However, it has become clear that international fair trade sales are not and will not become a panacea, even for coffee growers. Despite Mexico’s status as the world’s largest exporter of fair trade coffee (Raynolds 2000), international consumer demand remains far below supply, and not all communities can afford organic certification or are appropriately located to produce quality high-grown arabica coffee—both virtually requirements to enter the Northern fair trade

market. Other products, such as bananas, cacao and orange juice, are in the very early stages of fair trade market development. The vast majority of peasant farmers, moreover, are not even geographically situated to grow these potentially high-value crops.

Mexican civil society groups and organized producer groups came to realize that even with enormous growth, fair trade exports could never constitute a major development solution in and of themselves. For all but a few of the best organized coffee cooperatives, for example, Northern fair trade markets represent only a small fraction of their sales, and at best a modest additional increment to producers' incomes.

In response, these organizations formed Comercio Justo México (Fair Trade Mexico) in 1999, with a vision of building a domestic fair trade market. The organization has developed a Mexican fair trade label, which made its debut in 2001 and is the first such seal in a Southern nation.

[T]hese Mexican small producers do not only sell their goods on the international fair trade market. A significant part of their production continues to be sold in the domestic market, which is equally plagued by destructive intermediarism. The small producers need our nation's internal market to generate more just trading relations, and they need consumers to recognize their products. The "Fair Trade Seal of Mexico" makes it possible for these small producers to distinguish their products, and allows the consumer to have trust that—with their purchase—they are helping the Mexican farmers most in need (Comercio Justo México 2001a).

This comprehensive initiative is composed of three separate entities. Comercio Justo México, A.C. (Fair Trade Mexico) is a promotional and educational group that combines several civil society development NGOs and peasant producer organizations. Agromercados, S.A. (Agromarkets) is a marketing body for fair trade products, owned by the small producer member organizations (of each specific product) themselves. And Certimex, an independent Mexican



organic certifier, is responsible for monitoring adherence to fair trade criteria. Agromercados is establishing a chain of coffee shops in numerous cities to promote the sale of organic and fair trade coffee, and has created a single domestic fair trade coffee brand label (Café Fértil) for all its small coffee producer members.

With direct participation from grassroots producer groups and civil society organizations, Comercio Justo has developed a set of general fair trade criteria based on international standards, as well as specific quality and certification standards for coffee, and is doing the same for four other products: cacao, honey, handicrafts, and basic grains (principally corn). Comercio Justo stresses that its system is designed for organized peasant producers, and – unlike international fair trade certifiers – it does not intend to develop a separate “modality” for plantation agriculture or wage labor.

If building demand for fair trade products in the rich North is a formidable task, creating a domestic fair trade market in the Third World would seem a challenge of Herculean proportions. However, Comercio Justo believes that socially conscious consumerism is not restricted to those with discretionary income. The group insists that by eliminating intermediaries, fairly traded products can be sold at a “fair” price to the producer, will be competitive with comparable conventionally produced goods, and can even help address long-standing complaints about the quality of domestic products:

The low prices paid to small producers on the national market mean that the best Mexican products are exported. Fair Trade makes it possible for small producers to also receive dignified prices in the national market and to not depend exclusively on export (Comercio Justo México 2001b).

The group is already selling fair trade labeled Café Fértil in mainstream supermarkets and restaurants through contracts with large retailers, accompanied by major promotion and consumer education campaigns, a strategy that has been key to the success of fair trade coffee, bananas, and chocolate in Europe.

The development of a Southern, national fair trade seal also raises interesting issues of power and control within the fair trade movement. At stake here is the very potent question of who is empowered to certify whom in the international fair trade movement. Despite the fact that Southern producers do participate as members in some international fair trade organizations, the agenda, priorities, and criteria for fair trade have to date been set in the North (Renard 2003; Raynolds 2000). Other authors also note the “asymmetries of power at work in deciding what is fair” (Goodman and Goodman 2001: 114). The Mexican fair trade seal, says Comercio Justo, constitutes a “social certification,” with one part of civil society certifying –and regulating— another part of the society. As such, it enrolls both Southern producers *and* Southern consumers in the process of (re)constructing what Renard (1999: 484) calls fair trade’s “symbolic social meaning.”

### **Fair Trade Tortillerias**

One of the partners in the Comercio Justo México network is ANEC, the National Association of Peasant Marketing Enterprises. ANEC, which represents small- to medium-sized producers of basic grains in 20 of Mexico’s 31 states, is engaged in a separate but related initiative that speaks to a key Mexican grievance over “free trade”—the major, ongoing rural crisis precipitated by the opening of the Mexican market under NAFTA. Low quality imported corn, mainly from the US, has undercut even the most efficient Mexican producers and

contributed to the rural exodus to large cities and to the US. The quality of tortillas has declined in tandem (with an increasing proportion of dry corn meal, as opposed to whole-ground corn, present in even “fresh” tortillas), and prices have soared as the last federal subsidies and price controls are eliminated (Suárez 2002).

ANEC’s vision is ambitious: a national chain of tortillerias, selling fresh-ground tortillas made with GMO-free, Mexican corn grown by the organization’s members and certified with the Comercio Justo México seal. As of this writing, ANEC has opened three tortillerias and hopes to expand to 20 states by 2005 and nationwide (via franchises) by 2007. Victor Suárez, ANEC’s Executive Director, asserts that the seal holds relevance for domestic consumers:

The fair trade seal plays the role of assuring the buyer that the tortilla has a guarantee in all phases of the process... [that it is] 100 percent whole ground corn, not combined with corn meal, and comes from organized producers, with fair prices to the producer, and with a logic of medium- and long-term local [community] development (2002).

The tortillerias are owned and operated by ANEC’s local producer organizations, providing a significant opportunity to shorten the commodity chain, perceive added value and also expand the inclusiveness of fair trade. While all of certified international fair trade—and much of Comercio Justo’s network as well—focuses on traditional tropical export commodities such as coffee, bananas, and cocoa, ANEC’s tortilleria project poses a provocative challenge to the “conventional wisdom” within fair trade that has emphasized gourmet or niche markets and consumers with adequate disposable income to pay a premium price:

We want to begin in working-class neighborhoods. We want to test the concept there, because our idea is that fair trade should not just be for the elites, but for everyone, for the majority, for the poor people. Quality food for poor people. Why just quality for the rich? And at an equal price (Suárez 2002).

By providing a competitively-priced, better-tasting fair trade tortilla on a national level that appeals to themes of food sovereignty and fairness, this project suggests the possibility that fair trade can reach and benefit the agricultural as well as the consumer mainstream—in this case, producers and non-affluent buyers of basic grains.

### **Discussion: Building a “Market Where We All Fit”**

The term “fair trade” is at present almost exclusively associated with initiatives that connect producers in the South with consumers in the North. But the issue of “fairness” in agricultural pricing is hardly limited to either a single historical era or to one-way flows of commodities between macro-scale geopolitical areas. The “fairness” of agricultural prices has long been of concern to farmers, whether *campesinos* in Mexico or wheat producers in North Dakota. The North-North and South-South examples we have examined indicate clearly that the problems faced by small family producers transcend national and cultural boundaries. As economic globalization advances, such farmers in the North and South find themselves with increasingly common grievances, directed at similar sources.

Coffee farmers, apple workers and growers, watermelon producers, and dairy farmers have all developed broadly similar diagnoses of the problems they face. They complain of receiving a dwindling share of the final purchase price due to restructuring of both agriculture and commodity markets by increasingly powerful and vertically integrated transnational players—processors, distributors, importers and retailers. Not only are prices and wages perceived as unfair, they are also inconsistent and fluctuate wildly, and payment often comes late or on usurious terms, forcing farmers and workers further into debt. In both the United States and

Mexico, it is increasingly difficult to sustain a livelihood in family agriculture without pursuing either large-scale production or turning to narrow niche markets.

Not unexpectedly, given these parallels in their structural positions, the primary demand of both the Mexican and U.S. initiatives is for a “fair price.” The groups profiled in this article express a relatively consistent formulation of “fairness”: the ability to meet production costs with a little extra left over to support a family, save for the future, or fund community development projects. Many of these initiatives also exhibit other significant commonalities. There is a clearly expressed desire not just for fair prices, but for greater predictability: more stable prices and reliable, longer-term trading relationships. Bypassing market intermediaries is consistently seen to be the route to appropriation of a larger share of product value by farmers, and provision of a higher wage to laborers. All the initiatives incorporate some form of organic or sustainable production practices as an integral part of their approach. And forging direct producer-consumer links, especially with “conscious consumers” who place a premium on fair and sustainable production, is a principal tactic for structuring what Whatmore and Thorne (1997) call a “nourishing network.” In a general sense, then, both the Mexican and U.S. initiatives can be said to be pursuing “fair trade,” broadly conceived.

However, there are differences among the Northern efforts, and more importantly, between Comercio Justo México and its U.S. counterparts. Although principles associated with fair trade may provide a conceptual underpinning to the U.S. initiatives, the specific elements of the fair trade model make only partial and uneven appearances. The Midwest Food Alliance is the only organization that has developed more than an elementary set of standards, and that group alone is

engaged in formal certification. Only Red Tomato and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives provide farmers with pre-payment or credit. Only the United Farm Workers' apple campaign explicitly situates its program within a fair trade framework; references to fair trade in the other initiatives are minor pieces of backgrounding or entirely absent. The U.S. initiatives, to greater and lesser degree, may best be understood as "proto-" fair trade projects in which elements of the fair trade model appear in promising ways, but are neither fully developed nor systematized.

Comercio Justo's framework, on the other hand, is categorically framed as "fair trade," and its organizational structure and operational arrangements represent a direct reading of the international South/North fair trade model onto a domestic Mexican context, yet with active involvement by producers and civil society from the outset. Comercio Justo has developed comprehensive standards (both overall and commodity-specific) backed by a formal certification procedure and embodied in a label proclaiming its products to be fairly traded. The ANEC tortilleria network will utilize this label as one—but not the sole—element of its value claims.

Fair trade emerged in the context of the political economy of South/North interaction. Application of fair trade to South/South and North/North market relationships may have seemed an obvious step to Comercio Justo México, but it is a substantial epistemological leap for the Northern groups. Even Red Tomato, born out of Equal Exchange, has not fully embraced its own natal integument. Staffers at both Red Tomato and the Midwest Food Alliance say their organizations have not had serious discussions about engaging and utilizing the elements of fair trade in the framing or implementation of their work. Instead, what the U.S. initiatives draw upon is the conceptual and discursive apparatus associated with the familiar palette of ideas and

images historically linked to the “family farmer.” While the U.S. initiatives may be beginning to walk some of the fair trade walk, they are not talking much of the fair trade talk. What they *are* talking about is a fair price for the family farmer.

That, of course, is a very old theme. From the Populist era to the New Deal, a principal rallying cry for farmers in the United States was the demand for “parity,” for “fair” terms of trade between the farm and industrial sectors (Goodwyn 1978). But New Deal price support programs channeled this desire for a fair price into political activity around the continuation of subsidies for an undifferentiated “farmer,” rather than into serious questioning of the changing structure of agriculture or the development of programs connecting farmers to consumers. Despite an almost continuous “farm crisis” and attempts to deconstruct the “myth of the family farm” (e.g., Vogeler 1981), the language and iconography of Jeffersonian agrarianism has remained the touchstone of the “social imaginary” (Goodman and Goodman 2001) characteristic of U.S. agriculture. Given its hold on the popular imagination, reinforced through decades of political posturing and commercial advertising (Goldman and Dickens 1983), it is hardly surprising that staffers in the U.S. initiatives we have reviewed here frame their work principally as an effort to preserve “family farming” rather than as an exercise in fair trade.

This situation may be changing. Record levels of subsidy have failed to stem the decline in farm numbers, and the fairness of the federal subsidies themselves is being challenged as it has become clear that some 70 percent of support goes to 10 percent of the farmers, with environmentally destructive results. With the rise of the sustainable agriculture movement, a powerful interest has emerged among a set of U.S. farmers in achieving a “fair” return by

looking not to price supports, but to developing the consumer's willingness to pay for quality and environmental benefits. The market for organic and other value-added foods has grown rapidly, supported by the development of eco-labeling (Kane et al. 2000). However, the very success of the market for "green" foodstuffs has stimulated a corporatization of that sector in production, processing, and distribution (Guthman 2000; Du Puis 2000: 292). Monsanto and the Center for Biotechnology Information, for example, have shown that they can deploy not only the "family farmer" for their purposes, but "sustainability" as well (Kloppenburg et al. 2000). If truly sustainable farmers are to survive and prosper, it may be that "fair trade" can provide a useful tool to effectively differentiate them from their faux green/sustainable counterparts. Given broad consumer interest in "green" labels generally, and increasing awareness of highly visible fair trade products such as coffee in particular, it may be that foregrounding "fair trade" is an effective route to take.

Choosing such a path will mean defining what is "fair," and to whom. That in itself would be a useful exercise, inasmuch as it would focus serious attention on some of the more fundamental issues that proponents of sustainable food systems have so far tended to avoid. Most of the U.S. initiatives reviewed here refer simply to "farmers" or "family farmers" or, occasionally, "small" or "local" farmers. By contrast, Comercio Justo explicitly defines both the social sector that it intends to support (farmers "not structurally dependent on hired labor") and the type of groups into which it expects those producers to be organized ("small producer organizations which possess a formal and functionally democratic and independent organizational structure") (Comercio Justo México 2000). U.S. fair trade initiatives would not



necessarily need to reproduce those particular definitions, but they would have to come to terms with whether and how to differentiate among “family farms,” “larger than family farms,” and “family corporations.” The UFW apple campaign, with its focus on structurally disadvantaged small and medium family growers, represents a promising start in this direction.

Comercio Justo’s insistence on dealing with *organized* groups of farmers is also a critical feature of its work; indeed, those organized groups are key partners in the initiative itself. The linked effort by Red Tomato and FSC is the only Northern program that works exclusively with democratically organized small farmer cooperatives. The projects undertaken by Family Farm Defenders and the Midwest Food Alliance partly involve action through formal cooperatives, but the “typical” U.S. approach is to try to develop markets for atomized and unorganized producers. Addressing these issues of class and collective action would begin the process of decomposing the meaningless term “family farmer” and bring some clarity to the question of what sort of social characteristics a sustainable structure of agriculture could or should be expected to exhibit.

This question of social criteria applies to labor as well as to the owners and operators of farms. Of the North/North initiatives reviewed above, only the Midwest Food Alliance and the UFW apple campaign incorporate a concern for farm workers into their projects in a significant manner. Fairness for workers is, of course, the central objective of the UFW undertaking. The Midwest Food Alliance includes a set of “human resource development” elements in its certification criteria and is currently refining what has up to the present been a fairly vague set of standards. Goodman and Goodman (2001) also remind us that fairness ought to entail the capacity of both workers and consumers to afford sustainably produced foods. It is this objective

that motivated Comercio Justo to create a domestic Southern fair trade market, and informs ANEC's plans to target working-class consumers. The degree to which organic and sustainably produced foods in the U.S. constitute a "class diet" inaccessible to certain income groups ("yuppie chow") is an important question. Inclusion of such foods in institutional purchasing schemes (such as farm-to-school programs) could provide a means of ensuring that a wider segment of consumers have access to quality food. Defining the provision of sustainable food to public institutions as a matter of "fairness" could be a powerful argument for government support for such programs.

Each of the North/North initiatives profiled above utilizes labeling to convey key messages to consumers about social conditions of production. Comercio Justo México has gone substantially farther in codifying the specific standards that back up the claims made on its label (Comercio Justo 2000). The existence of those standards permits—indeed requires—third party certification, which in turn provides the credibility that may be necessary to achieve legitimacy with consumers (Kane et al. 2000: 29). There is understandable resistance among the relatively small-scale U.S. initiatives to implementing procedures which increase overhead costs and appear to cede control to outside organizations. As long as face-to-face interaction with customers is maintained, certification may not be necessary. But the sort of intimate linkages between producers and consumers that are characteristic of community-supported agriculture and direct marketing have clear limits. If the entire food system is to be transformed, then vehicles for transmitting information in formats beyond direct personal contact are necessary. Labeling is an effective option for operating at the scale necessary to achieve a significant impact in the

market. If the label is to have integrity and be distinguishable from superficially similar conventional advertising, then certification is useful. There is now deep interest in eco-labeling of food products (Kane et al. 2000), and fair trade could be a powerful component of the discursive options deployed to enhance the prospects of sustainable producers.

Enhancing the prospects for sustainable producers means linking them to markets. Goodman and Goodman (2001: 99) would prefer to have fair trade result in a “fundamental transformation of capitalist society and its distinctive rationality.” Yet nowhere in our review of North/North and South/South initiatives have we encountered anything rhetorical or programmatic resembling that sort of objective. There is a deep sense of the unfairness of markets as currently constituted, but no direct calls to link fair trade to a transition to a non-market society. Few of the actors involved in fair trade express a desire to escape from or break the market, in contrast to Brown’s (1993: 156) more radical call for trade to operate “in and against the market.” According to Comercio Justo México (2000: 5-6): “If the Fair Trade Model is to satisfy the expectations of the small producer, the penetration of mass consumer markets – such as major supermarket chains – is of utmost importance.” The Midwest Food Alliance, Red Tomato, and the UFW all express similar ambitions. Their approach shares much with Karl Polanyi’s (1944) assertion of the need to “re-embed” the market in the larger framework of social relations out of which it emerged and which it has come to dominate.

Fair trade, then, represents not a challenge to the existence of the market itself, but rather to how markets are constructed and administered, how they deliver and apportion economic benefit to participants. This is not to suggest, however, that participants in fair trade movements lack a

radical vision of market restructuring to achieve greater social justice. Indeed, Comercio Justo insists that its initiative is about transforming the very purpose of markets, reordering them to benefit the most disadvantaged members of society and creating *un mercado donde todos quepamos*—“a market where we all fit” (Christus 2001).

### **Conclusion: Harnessing the Moral Charge**

By utilizing “fair trade” as a universal term to describe a broader range of alternative market initiatives, consumers might be better educated to make the links between the processes driving small farmers in both North and South to economic collapse and off the land. Expanding consumers’ conceptualization of fair trade also holds out the promise of a more broadly understood and widely applicable set of principles, focused on restructuring markets to place value on community integrity, ecological sustainability, and responsible consumption. The heightened attentiveness to equity, inclusiveness, and the “other” at work in these domestic fair trade initiatives could help to mitigate the problems associated with the “defensive localism” of concern to some observers of alternative agro-food systems (Winter 2003; Goodman 2003; Hinrichs 2003).

Not all of these qualities are expressed to equal degree in North and South. While diversity within the fair trade movement is surely healthy, the “proto-” fair trade North/North initiatives profiled above could benefit from an active dialogue with their Southern fair trade counterparts—as well as with “traditional” international fair trade organizations—on several key issues, including addressing the conditions of labor as well as those of small producers, the role

of detailed standards and third-party certification, and the importance of “politicized commitments” within fair trade.

Meanings of fairness, we believe, are both locally specific and at the same time open to (re-)definition in an international context. Engaging these complexities can foster a productive exchange among consumers, activists, producers and academics about the role of trade in the relationship between North and South, between alternative markets and the larger “global market,” and it can give greater salience to calls for a comprehensive re-evaluation of the so-called “free trade” policies enforced by the World Trade Organization and other institutions. Expanding the understanding of fair trade to encompass North-North and South-South initiatives, far from “watering down” the concept, holds the potential to raise its profile and enhance its conceptual clarity, and perhaps to expand significantly the demand for fairly traded goods worldwide.

Consumers in the U.S., for example, who are unable to relate to the dire straits faced by small coffee or cocoa farmers in Guatemala or Ghana may more easily grasp the plight of hard-hit apple growers or indebted family farmers. An Equal Exchange staff member working to promote fair trade coffee in Wisconsin supermarkets says she had limited success in explaining the fair trade concept to consumers, until she began to use the analogy of struggling local dairy farmers:

They were able to understand it because they’ve seen what’s happened to farmers in their own communities, as prices dropped and large farms took over. Or maybe they were from a farming family that had to leave the land. So even though they don’t know any coffee farmers, they can understand the predicament of the coffee farmer in relation to farmers they do know. (Leinberger 2001)

Doubtless, many such regional “solidarity markets” exist with the U.S. and other nations. This sympathy for nearby producers—and workers—facing “unfair” conditions represents a barely-tapped reservoir of potential support for broader consumer and labor movements, an “engaged localism” extending beyond narrow considerations of place.

Through boycotts and tactics such as those employed by the anti-sweatshop movement, large numbers of consumers have demonstrated they will choose to avoid specific products if they believe the workers who grew or produced them were paid or treated unfairly. The growth of fair trade suggests that the converse is true as well. By imbuing “fairness” in food production with relevant local meanings, and linking it to notions of sustainability, social justice, and responsible consumption, the fair trade movement—in both its “traditional” and newer South/South and North/North manifestations—might more effectively harness the “moral charge” to improve conditions for small agricultural producers and laborers in both North and South, who are experiencing most directly the deleterious effects of economic globalization.

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