

Panel on the Ethics of Fair Trade Movements: Are Fair Trade Movements Fair(er)?

Fair trade movements seek to provide an alternative market for international food commodities, especially cash crops for export (e.g., coffee, cocoa). A key feature of fair trade is the guarantee of a base price for commodities, providing a higher wage for producers when commodity prices are low as well as protection from market fluctuations. Advocates of fair trade muster a wide range of arguments supporting the movement. Some of these arguments are specifically anti-capitalist, and understand fair trade as a means to move societies away from a model of exchange that is dominated by considerations of economic efficiency. Some target neo-liberalism as a paradigm of international trade. All presuppose that purchasing fair trade products over alternatives is ethically superior, if not obligatory.

Within the fair trade movement, there are tensions in values and disagreements over strategies. Although fair trade advocates often criticize free market principles, they sometimes appeal to these self-same principles when criticizing agricultural subsidies maintained by Northern producers. While many fair trade advocates criticize commodification and endorse transactions that better connect producers and consumers, the very nature of international trade is arguably in tension with such values and at odds with the espousal of these values by locavores. Since contemporary fair trade movements typically incorporate both issues of social welfare and environmental protection, fair trade raises issues of how to balance these sets of values. Fair trade movements also raise very fundamental issues of fair wages, human rights, the voluntariness of consumer choices, cosmopolitan obligations, and the proper roles of consumers vs. nation-states in satisfying international ethical demands.

The aim of the panel is to address a number of these ethical questions, consider if and how fair trade movements should expand, and to provide some depth of analysis to the fair trade movement and its critique of existing market structures.