Prof Wonders What’s Fair About Fair Trade?
Stuart Laidlaw

Gavin Fridell brings his own cup—emblazoned with the Trent University logo—when he goes to a coffee shop, chooses only Fair Trade coffee and comments on how he’s not doing enough to help poor farmers in developing countries.

“You can’t think that shopping is your ultimate political act,” he says in an interview at York University, where his book was launched last week. “You have to do more.”

Fridell, an assistant politics professor at Trent and a graduate of York, has just released *Fair Trade Coffee: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Market-Driven Social Justice*, a book taking a critical look at the successes and failures of the fast-growing Fair Trade sector.

Coffee is the top-selling product in the Fair Trade market, which includes such items as tea, chocolate, bananas, sugar and fruit juices. Long the preference of committed social activists, such products have gone mainstream in the last couple of decades, resulting in booming sales.

Fair Trade products must be produced under strict conditions—governing environmental sustainability, labour policies, education and income distribution—before the labelling agencies give the products their stamp of approval. The idea is to ensure that consumers’ dollars get to those producing the products.

Sales of Fair Trade coffee have quadrupled in Canada in the last decade, to more than 600 tonnes a year, Fridell writes. Worldwide, some 20,000 tonnes are sold each year, with a growth rate of almost 40 per cent as the coffee moves into new markets. In his book, however, Fridell charges that such growth has come because Fair Trade has veered far from its founding goals more than 60 years ago to build an alternative trading system that emphasizes social justice and sustainable development over profit.

Instead, he says, Fair Trade has become caught up in consumer culture, and risks becoming little more that an “ethical fig leaf” for companies trying to ride on Fair Trade’s coat-tails to attract socially conscious customers.
Such a pairing, Fridell warns, could ultimately prove to be Fair Trade’s downfall. “Fair Trade has made gains, but at the expense of being co-opted.”

As well, he warns, large coffee companies are watering down the concept of Fair Trade by coming up with their own proprietary blends that sound socially conscious—such as shade-grown or eco-friendly coffee—but which have far less stringent guidelines than Fair Trade.

Fridell still supports buying Fair Trade products, and does so himself, as an act of solidarity with peasant farmers trying to build better lives for their families, but says merely doing so is not going to be enough to make for a truly just or equitable trading system.

That, he says, will take political action. “If you really want to build a world that’s truly just, you’re going to have to take your Fair Trade coffee knowledge and get political,” he advises. “Think about the party you vote for.”

While most people had never heard of Fair Trade products until a decade or so ago, the movement has been around since the 1940s, with Oxfam among its early proponents, Fridell writes.

It began as a reaction to an unequal power dynamic between poor developing countries and large multinational corporations that dominate trade.

The idea was to showcase how trade could better be used to encourage development in the Third World, pull more people out of poverty and, one trade deal at a time, build an alternative outside the corporate world.

That never happened. With early Fair Trade products being sold exclusively in specialty Fair Trade stores and church basements, their markets remained small and their influence limited.

By the late 1980s, many Fair Traders were arguing that they needed to get the corporations on board. Labelling systems were developed to help the products get into mainstream stores, with Fair Trade labels used to brand them as items worthy of a higher price.

Coffee companies were successfully lobbied to include Fair Trade products on their shelves, alongside conventional beans. Grocery stores began offering Fair Trade coffee, as well, vastly expanding the market for such products.

The shift, Fridell says, has made Fair Trade part of Western consumer culture, dependent on the whims of fickle shoppers and dangerously tied to large corporations. Multinational Starbucks, for instance, has become Canada’s largest retailer of Fair Trade coffee, but is so large that
ethically grown beans represent no more than 2 per cent of its annual sales.

Fridell says that while Fair Trade groups now need such big companies to stay afloat, those same chains don’t need Fair Trade for anything more than enhancing their corporate image. “They only have to get on board enough to shut the Fair Trade people up.”

Rather than being seen as a threat to corporate-dominated trade, Fridell says, Fair Trade is now seen as a complement to it.

“The World Bank serves Fair Trade coffee at its headquarters,” he says of the Washington-based institution that has been a fervent supporter of unfettered free trade and a long-time target of left-leaning activists.

Fridell would like to see the Fair Trade movement return somewhat to its roots, using its new-found popularity and influence to push for real change in international trading rules to benefit small countries, as well as reforms in developing countries that benefit all their citizens.

He worries, however, that it might be too late. “The more they align themselves with trans-national corporations, the less able they are to offer an alternative.”

At the launch of Fridell’s book last week, Darryl Reed, chair of social sciences at York University and a former professor of Fridell’s—and an early Fair Trade advocate—said the movement needed to go mainstream to survive.

“If we all have to go to Ten Thousand Villages (a chain of Fair Trade stores) to buy our coffee, they’re not going to sell much coffee,” he says, admitting the movement has some thinking to do about how to effect change while working with large corporations.

“It’s really a strategic question.”

NOTES AND DEFINITIONS

go mainstream: become the norm instead of something unusual. (para. 4)

fig leaf: an allusion to the Bible, in Genesis, in which upon discovering their nakedness, Adam and Eve used fig leaves to cover up their genitals. The term today means an attempt at false modesty. (para. 7)
STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Laidlaw begins with an incident relevant to his topic. This opening is an anecdote, one of the common methods of introducing the topic and catching the reader’s attention.

The bulk of the article is a report of Gavin Fridell’s book *Fair Trade Coffee: The Prospects and Pitfalls of Market-Driven Social Justice*. Note how the writer refers to Fridell and his views using paraphrase and summary. Fridell becomes the primary source for Laidlaw as he explains the concept of fair trade and what it has changed to.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Consumers have to make many decisions, including ethical ones, when they choose products. For instance, they may want to avoid buying sneakers manufactured in sweatshops. They may want to buy local or purchase environmentally friendly products. They may want to contribute to a charity by buying a special line of products, such as pink appliances supporting breast cancer research. Discuss these issues. What guides you when you shop? Do you feel manipulated—that what you are doing has very little real value? Do you think you are fully informed?

2. Do you worry about our food supply as small family-run farms are replaced by factory-like operations? Explain why or why not.

3. We are told to buy products and spend money to keep the economy growing, but do we need so much stuff? Can we restrain our materialism?

4. Would you be willing to pay more to purchase a product if you knew the producer, the farmer, or the worker gets a greater portion of the money spent? Why or why not?

5. Has the ideal of fair trade been compromised by the endorsement of big business? Can it be extricated and returned to its original state?