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# Review of Fair Trade from the Ground Up: New Markets for Social Justice

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**April Linton. 2012. *Fair Trade from the Ground Up: New Markets for Social Justice*. University of Washington Press.**

April Linton's dedication to fair trade is rooted in her commitment to eliminating economic inequality, one of the main factors propelling the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle and one of the tenets of the World Social Forum (WSF). Dating from the 1980s, the fair trade movement predated the Seattle protests and the founding of the WSF; however, the later two developments jumpstarted many NGOs in their efforts to find effective ways to eradicate the exploitation of people, animals, and the environment in the name of profit. The Seattle protests catalyzed opposition to the globalizing forces that deepen economic disparities, and that opposition was then further channeled through the WSF process.

In this context, fair trade has emerged as a 'new' social movement that operates outside traditional organizing networks such as political parties and unions. In the Introduction to *Fair Trade From the Ground Up*, Linton recalls what happened in the summer of 1993. A group of protesters organized by the US/Guatemala Labor Education Project picketed the Seattle historic Pioneer Square store of a rapidly expanding company called Starbucks: they demanded that Starbucks stop buying coffee from plantations where workers were mistreated and paid unfair wages. The picketers deeply moved the company's coffee buyer: he knew they were right, as he later revealed to the store's manager.

That Starbucks' store manager was April Linton, and that coffee buyer is now one of the senior vice presidents (Linton does not name her/him) of what is today the largest coffee house in the world. As for Linton, she quit her job, went back to school, became a member of the University of Washington's WTO History Project, specialized in the politics of bilingualism in the U.S., taught sociology at UCSD for several years, coauthored the 2008 publication *The Global Governance of Food*, and finally landed at the Fair Labor Association in Washington, DC.

In the book, Linton, who defines fair trade as "a market-based approach to integrating social responsibility and global commerce" (9), offers an overview of the history and philosophy of fair trade by giving attention to the producers' perception of fair trade. The case studies she offers show that transparency and full knowledge of buyers and consumers seem to be lacking. She also analyzes the makeup of fair trade participants and the ongoing challenges related to its feasibility as a sole source of revenue. There are 800 Fair Trade certified producer organizations worldwide; Linton points out that nearly half of them grow coffee. Thus, when speaking of fair trade, it makes sense to focus on coffee. Linton looks at the different aspects of the 'fair trade system,' literally 'from the ground up.' Linton's research on coffee production in Guatemala builds on the work done over the years by anthropologist Sarah Lyon in a cooperative of indigenous

farmers around Lake Atitlán; the extensive survey, prepared by the author and conducted between January and February 2008, explores fair trade sales, revenues, expenses, and uses of the social premium. The study generally confirmed the shared perception that participation in fair trade improves the livelihood of cooperative's members and neighbors. The study also looked at the practice of “side-selling” lower grade coffee to local intermediaries known as 'coyotes' in the absence of adequate credit. Scarce pre-financing from buyers is an issue and this practice remains a viable way for farmers to make fast cash. Linton invites us to reflect on whether this practice is truly undermining fair trade.

Another area of research whose results Linton relates in one of the chapters (co-written with Mary Murphy) pertains to the use of social premiums. The findings of this study, which involved 221 producer groups, indicated that older fair trade groups are more likely to contribute to the public good than their younger counterparts; groups usually prioritize local development goals; farming communities seem to benefit when fair trade *and* aid are both involved; and finally, quite intuitively, public health initiatives are more likely to occur where groups are larger (72-73).

Linton also poses questions regarding the sales of fair trade products in mainstream businesses that otherwise do not uphold fair labor standards (Walmart is a case in point). She wonders whether this phenomena provides more exposure for fair trade products, thus ultimately promoting its larger cause, or whether it compromises fair trade's integrity. Linton argues that the nature of fair trade is two-fold: it is both a movement and a market, whose complimentary character depends on the extent to which “there is transparency for all stakeholders” (5). To Linton, this represents the first priority of the fair trade movement: “*to create window through which producers can see buyers at least as well as buyers can see them*” (161-162).

Linton also conducted in-depth interviews with fair trade activists in the U.S. Fair trade globalizes interpersonal relationships, but only to the degree to which a person's “control beliefs”—an expression referring to how much someone thinks his or her actions make a difference—actually influence what she buys (Shaw and Shiu cit. in Linton 91). In other words, it is hard to make an activist (or, a political consumer) out of *anybody*. Therein lies the challenge of the fair trade movement as a promoter of the idea of global citizenry: the challenge, for both media critics and sociologists, is to figure out ways to translate to the larger public a truly revolutionary idea, such as that of the 1999's WTO protests. Another world is possible, but only if we understand ourselves to be part of a global community whose members are reciprocally related economically, and thus socially and culturally as well. Even though geographical distance is deceptive and alienates us from the producers, Linton is a firm believer in the benefits of

continued dialogue in the Global North to trigger “a positive cycle of change” (117).

In a sense, that is what students were able to do at the University of California at San Diego. One of the most fascinating sections of the book is the chapter in which Linton retraces the history of how UCSD became the second fair trade university in the United States. Linton uses interviews with activists and administrators who played a part in the process. The first 'One Earth One Justice' campaign back in 2003 was in fact centered around the idea of 'economic democracy': “the idea of using your money as a tool to make change in the world, so to use every dollar—your everyday spending—as a vote for a better world” (cit. in Linton 128). Thanks to the activism of One Earth One Justice, by 2008 UCSD had created an Environment and Sustainability Initiative and declared the goal of becoming the greenest campus in the world (132). Evidence of student demand and its persistence were crucial to prompting the administration to espouse the cause of fair trade. In addition, Linton points to the crucial role played by linking fair trade with the larger picture of environmental sustainability, as well as with social and economic sustainability, in making fair trade “an institutionalized effort to change norms about consumption, waste, social justice, and respect for the planet” (142).

So here is Linton’s recipe, modeled after the UCSD experience, for social change in the Global North: a just (but also ‘feel-good’) cause eventually leads to crucial modifications in lifestyle and behaviors as “[e]ventually, consumers on campus will not have to make decisions about human rights or environmental protection every time they buy a beverage; the choice will be have been made for them” (142).