

BUYING INTO FAIR TRADE

TEACHER'S GUIDE



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Stamped on products from coffee to handicrafts, the term "fair trade" has quickly become one of today's most seductive consumer buzzwords. Purportedly created through fair labor practices, or in ways that are environmentally sustainable, fair-trade products give buyers peace of mind in knowing that, in theory, how they shop can help make the world a better place. *Buying into Fair Trade* turns the spotlight onto this growing trend, exploring how fair-trade shoppers think about their own altruism within an increasingly global economy.

Using over 100 interviews with fair-trade consumers, national leaders of the movement, coffee farmers, and artisans, author Keith Brown describes both the strategies that consumers use to confront the moral contradictions involved in trying to shop ethically and the ways shopkeepers and suppliers reconcile their need to do good with the ever-present need to turn a profit.

SUMMARY

Beginning with a recounting of a “reality tour” of a Nicaraguan coffee farm, this chapter goes on to introduce the fair trade movement, including its origins, its major players, and the debates about its future. The controversy over Fair Trade USA, and the term “fair trade” being co-opted by existing multinational corporations is addressed. Fair trade is becoming an important area because of the “ethical turn” of the market, where socially responsible products become mainstream. The chapter also describes the ethnographic methods used for the book’s research, and the identification of three types of fair trade shoppers: *promoters* who base their consumer habits around social responsibility and often work for fair trade businesses or organizations, *conscientious consumers* who like to buy socially responsible products but do not devote all their shopping to the practice, and *purchasers* who are largely ignorant of fair trade but buy because of aesthetics, price, taste, or utility. Finally, the chapter discusses motivations for fair trade shopping, ranging from morality to enjoying the social benefits of appearing to be “fair trade.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What motivates Americans and other First World citizens to become fair trade advocates? How do they describe their motivations?
2. What is the “ethical turn” in markets? What factors contributed to the growing emphasis on sustainability?
3. What are the types of fair trade consumers and how do they relate their identity to fair trade? What types of people tend toward each lifestyle?

ILLUSTRATIONS

- » Table 1.1 Fair Trade Coffee Statistics 1998-2012 (Fair Trade USA).
- » Cartoon depicting controversy over TransFair USA changing its name to Fair Trade USA (John Klossner).
- » Map of Independents coffee shops and Ten Thousand Villages stores in Philadelphia.



"Just One Normal Coffee"

pages 31–53

SUMMARY

Chapter 2 discusses some of the experiences and realities of running a fair trade business. The chapter focuses on the first fair trade coffee shop in Philadelphia, Joe Café a.k.a. Joe Coffee Bar, and its owner Joe Cesa. An Italian-American inspired by a trip to Italy, Joe wanted to bring European-style coffee bars to the United States. The chapter goes on to portray how Joe discovered the fair trade movement and became increasingly involved with it. Fair trade was a novel concept at the time and Joe recounts the difficulties he faced in garnering support from friends, family, and colleagues, and generating customer interest. A combination of personal problems, unfortunate business decisions, and the difficulties of making a profit from fair trade practices came together to cause the Café to close. However, Joe kept it going long past the point where many advised him to give up, driven by an (alternative) reward system. The chapter concludes by demonstrating that while Joe eventually went out of business, he had received emotional satisfaction from the feeling of helping impoverished coffee farmers, and from the positive reputation he had amongst those in the fair trade movement.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

How did Joe become involved with fair trade, and what kept him involved and motivated, even as his business suffered? Were Joe's actions rational from an economic point of view?

1. Consider the financial advice given to Joe by fellow fair trade business owners, and more generally the cases of successful fair trade companies. To what degree is it possible for a business to stay true to the ethics of fair trade while also remaining viable?

ILLUSTRATIONS

- » Joe Cesa speaking in front of City Hall at "Uninsured Americans Week" in May 2005.
- » Sign for Joe Coffee Bar, advertising its organic and fair trade practices (Pamela Lowe).



CHAPTER 3

“Buy More Coffee”
pages 55–72

SUMMARY

Moving on from the specific example of Joe Café, Chapter 3 addresses how “extraordinary experiences” turn citizens into promoters of fair trade and ethical consumption. The chapter demonstrates how face-to-face interaction with coffee farmers and artisans becomes a transformative experience. Numerous anecdotes from fair trade promoters are provided, where they share how they found meaning and purpose, and led to a better understanding of the global community. These experiences are so powerful that many fair trade organizations will fund trips to areas such as Nicaragua or Indonesia for store and café managers, allowing them to have extraordinary experiences as well. They return with powerful, emotional stories of what they saw and encountered, motivating them to sell more fair trade products. The chapter also talks about “parading the producers,” which is the practice of flying farmers or artisans to North America or Europe to meet fair trade advocates there. However, interactions between producers and promoters can become complex, such as when a coffee farmer proudly boasted of his coffee sales to Starbucks, which offended the fair trade advocates who preferred to demonize large corporate chains. The chapter ends discussing the different responses the author observed from promoters who were adamant about their ethical consumerism, and conscientious consumers who struggled with “having” to go to stores without fair trade practices.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the significance of the “buy more coffee” phrase in the title of this chapter? How did fair trade promoters change their business practices after traveling to see how fair trade products are produced?
2. How did Illies Mouhmoud and Cesar Rivas both meet and defy the expectations of their fair trade promoter hosts?

ILLUSTRATIONS

- » Eulalia Valdez Palomino and Beltran Leguia Masias, fair trade farmers, being hosted in the Independents Coffee Cooperative (Pamela Lowe)



“Who Are We Pillaging from This Time?”

pages 73–93

SUMMARY

This chapter begins by addressing “Gwen,” the hypothetical customer that Ten Thousand Villages bases its marketing decisions on. It then goes onto discuss the realities of customers who buy fair trade and organic products. The focus is on the conscientious consumers brought up at the end of the last chapter, who attempt to buy fair trade products, but do so for a variety of reasons and do not have the same level of commitment as fair trade promoters. The chapter reveals that both promoters and conscientious consumers often claim their purchase of fair trade products is for reasons other than ethics. Nobody wants to come off as “preachy” to towards others. Conscientious consumers must also navigate issues of price, quality, aesthetics and reliability. The chapter displays how many supporters of fair trade do not have the money to make all their purchases comply with fair trade goals. Ultimately, the chapter ends with the reality that ethical consumerism requires extensive identity work.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who is the “ideal-typical” Ten Thousand Villages customer and how does she compare to the customers seen in this chapter and the rest of the book?
2. What is “licensing” and how does it result from fair trade purchasing?
3. How do conscientious consumers perceive and interact with chain stores like Target, Wal-Mart, Gap, etc.?
4. What do customers say they are looking for and trying to communicate with a fair trade gift?

*How to Appear Altruistic
pages 95–119***SUMMARY**

This chapter acts as a critique of those within the fair trade movement, which has its own well-developed social scene and hierarchy. Within this scene, there are distinctive ways to gain status by appearing altruistic, yet not necessarily truly benefitting the producers fair trade claims to support. The chapter describes the three steps to appearing altruistic as: 1. Boycott the Market Leader and Change the World, 2. Lead a Moral Crusade against a Fairwashing Company, and 3. Tell Exotic Stories about Fair Trade. Following these steps ensures a positive reputation, but the author questions how much they truly help alleviate poverty. Boycotting market leaders like Wal-Mart often leads to competitors like Target being given a free pass because their practices, likely comparably bad, are unexamined. Leading a moral crusade against a fairwashing company such as Starbucks may appear impressive but may negatively impact farmers who are supposed to benefit from fair trade. Telling exotic stories about producers entices customers and allows promoters to feel impassioned about their work, but also risks fetishizing and stereotyping the producers that fair trade is meant to help. Furthermore, ethical consumerism can be perceived as doing more good than it actually is, and disrupts attempts at global social change. Ultimately, the chapter concludes with examples of truly dedicated ethical consumers, who are all too often viewed as “crazy, idealists, or communists.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between merely appearing altruistic and actually being altruistic?
2. Why do companies like Wal-Mart have a negative reputation in comparison to companies like Target?
3. How do the images of Annie Leonard, Collin Beavin, and Bill Talen contrast with that of “altruistic” conscientious consumers? Why might people want to see them as “crazy?”

ILLUSTRATIONS

- » A photo of Joe Coffee Bar, closed, with a “Dunkin’ Donuts Coming Soon” sign over it (Pamela Lowe).



*The Great Recession and the Social Significance of Buying into Fair Trade, pages 121–140***SUMMARY**

The final chapter of the book explores to what degree fair trade shopping and conscientious consumerism can actually create change. The author identifies buying fair trade products as being “small acts,” defined as activities that aid a social cause but don’t necessarily have meaning for the participant. A comparison is drawn to signing a petition, which does not necessarily indicate a deep dedication to the cause on the part of the signer. The chapter then goes on to discuss how fair trade coffee and handicraft shops in Philadelphia fared during the onset of the Great Recession and what has happened to them leading up to the present day. The chapter then discusses the limitation of fair trade, arguing that while it does improve the lives of producers, it does so marginally and by working within the system, and will likely never end poverty. However, fair trade shopping can act as a “gateway drug” to a further life of activism. The chapter concludes on this note, reflecting on how experiences with fair trade can lead to efforts to affect change and alter attitudes, but people will still attempt to avoid being seen as “too preachy” with their cause.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What constitutes a “small act?” What other activities thought beneficial might really be “small acts?”
2. How is Ten Thousand Villages’ business model different than that of Independents coffee shops and how has that affected their viability during the recession?
3. What is the current major debate within the fair trade movement?
4. To what extent are fair trade producers, promoters, and consumers benefited by their interactions with the fair trade movement?

APPENDIX: RESEARCH METHODS*pages 141-154*

The appendix provides a description of how the author conducted his research and interviews. The interview guide used is reproduced at the end of the chapter alongside the trends that were identified. The appendix also includes brief descriptions of the four coffee shops that founded the Independents Coffee Cooperative.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What did you know about fair trade before reading this book? How did you come across it?
2. Why do people go on “reality tours?” Which locations do they travel to and why?
3. Why has Fair Trade USA (formerly TransFair USA) been controversial? What conflicting goals does this reveal in the fair trade movement?
4. Do you identify as a fair trade promoter, conscientious consumer, or purchaser, or none of the above? Would you rather be a different type of consumer? Why?
5. What role did Joe Cesa play in the Philadelphia fair trade movement?
6. How does Joe Cesa compare to other business owners (including fair trade owners), both as seen in the text and in your personal experience?
7. What lessons can be learned from the closure of Joe Coffee Bar?
8. What do Joe Cesa’s comments in the notes for Chapter 2 (see pages 159-161) reveal about his mindset? How does he reflect on the depiction of his coffee business and activities?
9. Compare the various stories of “extraordinary experiences” and “reality tours” presented throughout the book. What common themes arise?
10. How do the fair trade promoters’ expectations of farmers and producers contrast with reality?
11. What are the ethical consequences of “reality tours” and the practice of “parading the producers,” especially in regards to views of race and “foreignness?”
12. Why do some advocate “buying more coffee” as the best way to help farmers? Are they correct?
13. How does the “ideal” fair trade customer who shops at Ten Thousand Villages or an Independents coffee store compare to a customer who shops at Wal-Mart or Starbucks? What are the implications about class and race for the fair trade movement?
14. Why is it so important to avoid coming off as “preachy” about fair trade?
15. How has fair trade in some ways become a community that values appearances over results?

Why are people who dedicate themselves to sustainable lifestyles and education dubbed “crazy, idealists, or communists,” sometimes even by those who support fair trade? Why is a typical response to a fair trade initiative to say “We’re not Europe”?

16. Do you agree that the value of signing a petition is lessened by its ease today? What about other "small acts?" What types of activism are truly effective and meaningful?
17. Is fair trade limiting itself by working within the existing economic system? Are there more effective alternatives? Are they realistic options?
18. The author proposes that buying fair trade may act as a "gateway drug" into further activism, so what types of activism could a fair trade consumer move onto?
19. Do you "buy into" the idea and benefits of fair trade? Why or why not?

SUPPLEMENTAL ASSIGNMENTS

Look at the interview guide questions on pages 150-151. Write down your own answers and then reflect upon them. Then conduct interviews of your own using the questions, and note what trends you see in the answers. How do their attitudes compare to those of the people interviewed in the book?

Locate the fair trade coffee shops and handicrafts stores nearest to you. If there are none in your area, reflect on the reasons why that might be. If there are shops nearby, visit one. Observe the behaviors of customers and staff. Do the members of the staff tell the stories of the goods in the store? Do the customers listen?

Identify a corporation that has a negative reputation for unfair practices or issues like sweatshops, like Wal-Mart. Research and compare them to their closest competitors. Is the company with the bad reputation unique, or simply more publicized?

Keep track of all your purchases (food, goods, services), no matter how inexpensive, for at least two weeks. Afterwards, look at your list: how many were fair trade or produced in a sustainable manner? Did you engage in licensing at any point? What criteria did you base your purchasing selections on? Aesthetics? Price? Convenience? Morality?

Create a basic outline of a business plan for a fair trade coffee or handicrafts store in your area. What aspects do you prioritize and why? Is it important to try and avoid the financial failure of a place like Joe Coffee Bar? Consider factors such as location, pricing, aesthetics, policies on sharing "extraordinary experiences," and connections to local communities and other fair trade promoters.