

REVIEW: DAVID RANSOM, *THE NO-NONSENSE GUIDE TO FAIR TRADE*. TORONTO: NEW INTERNATIONALIST AND BETWEEN THE LINES, 2001.

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Over the past thirty years, the "fair trade" industry has grown steadily and made some notable inroads into European and North American markets. Yet, surprisingly little critical literature has been written on the subject. This makes *The No-Nonsense Guide to Fair Trade*, by David Ransom, a welcome addition to a sparse body of literature. According to Ransom, the fair trade industry has emerged to combat the terrible human costs of a global economy dominated by transnational corporate empires that monopolize and manipulate global markets through their influence on national governments, marketing schemes, and sheer economic weight. These corporate empires rule over an international market characterized by rampant speculation and the consistent long-term decline of the price of primary commodities in relation to manufactured goods. The resultant effect is that poor primary producers in the South are left vulnerable to the whims of transnational corporations who make huge profits buying primary commodities cheap, processing them in the North, and then selling them for much higher prices in Northern markets. Ransom asserts that policies based on "free trade" and "comparative advantage" are employed selectively to protect and perpetuate this unequal relationship.

Members of the fair trade industry hope to combat the injustices of the global economy by promoting the principles

of democratic organization, no child labour, "decent" working conditions, environmental sustainability, a minimum guaranteed price, social premiums paid by the buyer to promote the collective good of producer communities, and a long-term relationship between buyer and seller that can provide some stability against market fluctuations. Ransom takes the reader on a journalistic-style tour of fair trade producer communities in Mexico and Peru (coffee), Ghana (cocoa), and the Dominican Republic (organic bananas) and reveals how fair trade has raised living standards by providing a degree of price stability and infrastructure development. The book is full of interesting, and sometimes amusing stories (such as when a Ghanaian cocoa farmer is taken on a tour of "Cadbury World" in London) as well as figures and tables which serve to drive home Ransom's arguments about the injustices of global trade and the benefits of fair trade.

Having demonstrated the immediate benefits of fair trade for that relative few who participate in it, Ransom provides suggestions on how these benefits can be broadened to other producers. He places a great deal of hope on the power of consumers, who have the ability to choose "the relatively good rather than the absolutely bad products" (106). In his view, one of the greatest benefits of fair trade is that it reveals to consumers where commodities come from and encourages them to make morality a consideration when purchasing goods. The growth of fair trade production depends largely on whether or not consumers can be induced to purchase more fair trade goods. Ransom believes that one option for expanding the consumer base of fair trade is to strengthen the links between organic and fair trade production, bringing the needs of producers and consumers

closer together. Ransom also directs a fair bit of attention to the role of the state, and maintains that a strong, interventionist state has a key role to play in the provision of subsidies, credit, education, healthcare, and technology required by fair trade producer communities. To achieve this, he argues for the necessity of an international alliance of trade unions, environmental groups, fair traders and other activist groups to put pressure on governments to abandon neoliberal policies and make the market the "servant" and not the "master" of the people.

In general, Ransom's book is highly readable and his arguments are persuasive and firmly supported. Yet the book does have some weaknesses. First, Ransom employs a rather confusing use of the term "postmodern," arguing that we live in a "postmodern" age that has taken us "back to the dark, satanic mills of the 19th century" (102). So our allegedly "postmodern" epoch is characterized by a return to the ravages of the modern world. Second, the book is a bit awkwardly assembled. The sections on the Ghanaian cocoa industry are based on the travels and research of Richard Swift. Yet Ransom continues to describe events in the first person as if they were his experiences. Matters get more confusing when the author presents an idealized portrayal of local markets in Africa, and then a few pages later asserts that local markets are not inherently more just than international markets. Is this a contradiction in Ransom's own analysis, or is it a conflict between the opinions of Swift and those of Ransom's?

The greatest weakness of the book is Ransom's failure to address the significance of accepting, as the fair trade industry does, the market as the final arbiter of prices and the allocation of labour and commodities. The market is an

inherently unfair mechanism, which alienates labourers from the goods they produce, brings about crisis through its everyday operations, and drives producers to increase accumulation, either through the exploitation of workers or the self-exploitation of petty commodity producers, in order to remain competitive and survive. State intervention may soften the injustices of the market, but can it truly make the market "fair?"

Ransom, while failing to address the above concern, is prepared in a general sense to counter those critics on the left who would argue that fair trade does not do enough. He asserts that "even if all we want is to get from here to there [a just world], here is where we are" (125). Under present conditions, fair trade may not be the ideal solution, but it does raise living standards, empowers people to get greater control over their own lives, and encourages consumers to look beyond the market when purchasing goods. To the cynic he states: "You may not be able to change the world as much as you would like by shopping with your eyes open – but keeping them closed makes absolutely certain that it stays the same" (127).