

## Perspectives

# “A MARKET WHERE WE ALL FIT” ADULT EDUCATION AND THE FAIR TRADE MOVEMENT

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### **Abstract:**

*The global market continues to create the “great and permanent evils” so well outlined by Karl Polanyi in his book, The Great Transformation. His description of the destructive effects of the emerging self-regulating market during the Industrial Revolution is reflected today in the ongoing erosion of social, environmental, and economic sustainability in both the North and the South. In this downward spiral of life parameters, fair trade opens up the possibility of a market where we all fit, not where we all ultimately fail. Adult education has a vital role to play in opening up spaces where fair trade can prosper and grow, thus contributing to a second great transformation to a more sustainable society.*

### **Résumé de recherche**

*Le marché global continue de créer des ‘énormes éléments de destruction permanents’ si bien décrits par Karl Polanyi dans son livre La grande transformation. La description qu’il nous présente des effets destructifs du marché autorégulateur durant la Révolution industrielle se traduit aujourd’hui par une érosion continue de la durabilité des tissus social, environnemental et économique autant dans l’hémisphère nord que dans l’hémisphère sud. C’est dans cette tendance à la baisse des paramètres de la vie que le marché équitable s’ouvre sur des possibilités d’un marché où chacun a sa place et non où chacun, ultimement, échoue. L’éducation continue des adultes a un rôle vital à jouer dans l’ouverture de créneaux compatibles à l’épanouissement et à la prospérité du marché équitable et, par voie de conséquence, contribuera à l’émergence d’une deuxième grande transformation envers une société plus durable.*

### Introduction

By its very existence, the term *fair trade* raises questions that invite disturbing answers. Like other loaded terms such as *carrying capacity*, it poses problems and introduces alternatives to the "straitened ethics of the neo-liberal market" (Jaffee, Kloppenburg, & Monroy, 2004, p. 169). The international fair trade movement directly challenges the historically exploitative character of world trade by seeking to "destabilize neo-liberal knowledge claims regarding the normalcy of commercial conventions through a reconsideration of the meaning of 'fairness' in commodity prices, market exchanges, and North-South relations" (Raynolds, 2002, pp. 409–410).

As an alternative business practice and model, fair trade opens up social, environmental, and economic possibilities not readily available in today's neo-liberal market. Adult education has a role to play in helping to open up these possibilities. This paper will begin with a discussion of adult education and social movements. It will then examine the origins of the current market system and the social movements that arose in response to the creation of the self-regulating market, before looking at the fair trade movement itself. The paper will conclude with an exploration of what has been called "a market where we all fit" (*Cristus*, 2001) — a market based on fair trade — and the role of adult education in creating and maintaining such a market.

Adult education in Canada is understood as having three main and enduring traditions: first, a set of unyielding social purposes informed by passion and outrage and rooted in a concern for the less privileged; second, a systematic and sustained philosophical and critical analysis that develops the abilities to connect immediate, individual experiences with underlying societal structures; and third, a keen attention to the specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes and analyses are made real in the lives of Canadians (Nesbit, 2006, p. 17). The fair trade movement presents adult educators with not only the occasion to affirm these traditions, but also the opportunity to continue these traditions so that others may benefit well into the future. The paper offers a way to think about and analyse adult education initiatives in relation to their support of progressive social movements in general, as well as the fair trade movement in particular.

### Adult Education and Social Movements

Adult education has long been associated with social movements, from the early days of the co-operative, trade union, and organic farming movements to the modern environmental, women's, and peace movements. Morris (2005, p. 589) describes social movements as "a wide variety of collective attempts to bring about a change in social institutions or to create a new social order." From this description we can understand that not all social movements are concerned with change that is progressive, defined by Miles (1996, p. 287) as "political activity which reflects humanly desirable goals and can be seen to operate at the edge of the potential for freedom in any given period." Rather than complementing the three main traditions of Canadian adult education, some social movements can be considered regressive. Consider, for example, Sklair's (1997) contention that shopping is the most successful social movement; it is able to mobilize millions into the streets every day. To this case, Morris adds such anti-progressive movements as fascism, white supremacism, and fundamentalist religious movements.

Morris (2005) posits three levels of generality concerning the relationship between adult education and social movements. First, all social movements have an adult educational dimension. Second, some adult education initiatives, such as Danish folk high schools, were or are social movements. And third, to some activists, all of adult education, as they define it, is a social movement. Regardless of the level chosen, there is little doubt about the close relationship of adult education and social movements.

Hall and Clover (2005) argue that whatever else social movements are or do, they are exceedingly rich learning environments. For these authors, social movement learning involves both learning by people who are part of a social movement and learning by people who are outside of a social movement as a result of actions taken or simply by the existence of social movements. This learning dynamic is corroborated by Miles (1996), who maintains that the ideal context for the motivation to learn, and for adult education for social change, is social movement. She refers to Miles Horton and Paulo Freire when she argues that little pockets of hope can provide the context for education for social change: “In generally quiescent times the challenge for progressive adult educators is not to initiate abstract general educational campaigns so much as to find and foster and serve these ‘pockets of hope’” (p. 277).

As a site of social learning, the fair trade movement has become one of those “pockets of hope” by working to create a market where we all fit — a market based on fair trade where we mutually benefit from and contribute to collective economic, social, and environmental well-being. In this way, it aligns with Nesbit’s (2006, p. 17) conceptualization of the practice of adult education as being part of “a broader and vital mission for ‘really useful knowledge’ that helps create a more equitable world at individual, family, community and societal levels.” But in order to understand how the movement creates an equitable market, becomes a site of learning, and produces useful knowledge, we must first examine the history, and the failure, of the current market system.

### **A Market Where We All Fail**

Fair trade is a protective response to the dominant form of trade that is objectively not fair. If it was, then the term *fair trade* would be redundant and the concept of fairness would be embedded in the word *trade* itself. Browne, Harris, Hofny-Collins, Pasiiecznik, and Wallace (2000) illustrate this point when they argue that “the opposite of fair trade is not unfair trade but conventional trade” (p. 70). Given its long and diverse history, how has trade reached the point where it can be understood as not fair and failing individuals, society, and the planet itself? The writings of Karl Polanyi help to answer this question.

Polanyi’s (2001) classic work, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, reveals three kinds of trade: external trade, local trade, and internal trade. External, or non-local, trade involves carrying, because there is an absence of some types of goods in the region. Its complement, local trade, is limited to the goods of the region, which do not bear carrying because they are too heavy, bulky, or perishable. According to Polanyi, both external and local trade are relative to geographical distance and need not involve competition. Internal trade, on the other hand, is essentially competitive, and “only with the emergence of internal, or national, trade does competition tend to be accepted as a general principle of trading” (p. 63).

Early markets emerged from trade and were embedded within social relations. Polanyi (2001) defines a market as “a meeting place for the purpose of barter or buying and selling” (p. 59). With external trade, “markets developed naturally out of it where the carriers had to halt as at fords, seaports, riverheads, or where the routes of two land expeditions met” (p. 63). The beginnings of local, or neighbourhood, markets are obscure, but over time their form has changed little, showing “indifference to time and place” (p. 66). Internal trade was different. In Western Europe it was “created by the intervention of the state” (p. 66) and foisted on fiercely protectionist towns and principalities in the form of mercantilism, bringing with it competition and monopoly. Although mercantilism introduced enormous changes, the economic system was still “submerged in general social relations” (p. 70), with markets merely “accessories of economic life” (p. 71).

The “great transformation” to a market economy came with the Industrial Revolution. According to Polanyi (2001), “a market economy is an economic system controlled, regulated and directed by market prices; order in the production and distribution of goods is entrusted to this self-regulating mechanism” (p. 71). Uniquely derived from the principle of gain, such a “self-regulating” market required the deliberate commodification of labour, land, and money, and “demands nothing less than the institutional separation of society into an economic and a political sphere” (p. 74). In effect, a “market economy involves a society the institutions of which are subordinated to the requirements of the market mechanism” (p. 187). Such subordination, in turn, creates the “perils to society” (p. 75) so eloquently described by Polanyi. Throughout his book, he argued forcefully that the “market economy if left to evolve according to its own laws would create great and permanent evils” (p. 136).

These evils — mass starvation, displacement, brutal working conditions, and loss of livelihood — are clearly evident in the historical record. They are connected, over time, to the evils of today’s global market, based on an ethical system that values money above all else (McMurtry, 1999a). As in the past, this is a self-regulating market that catastrophically fails individuals, society, and the environment in its singular pursuit of profit at all costs. But even as the global market fails millions around the world and destroys the environment on which we all depend, social movements arise to protect us from the “great and permanent evils” of the self-regulating market economy.

### **Social Movements of Protection**

From the outset, the imposition of the market economy spawned a range of social movements, which Polanyi (2001) referred to as countermovements of protection. The enclosures — “a revolution of the rich against the poor” (p. 37) — had driven people off the land and prevented them from accessing their traditional sources of subsistence. Those who could not find work in the “satanic mills” of the Industrial Revolution simply starved. Indeed, “under the rules of the market, the people could not be prevented from starving” (p. 168). In this way, the *laissez-faire* dogma of the self-regulating market dealt efficiently with the inevitable consequences of enclosures. In the words of Polanyi, “*laissez-faire* was simply a principle of the ensurance of law and order, at minimum cost. Let the market be given charge of the poor, and things will look after themselves” (p. 122).

In the face of this grinding market logic, protective social movements arose spontaneously.

The critical stage was reached with the establishment of a labor market in England, in which workers were put under the threat of starvation if they failed to comply with the rules of wage labor. As soon as this drastic step was taken, the mechanism of the self-regulating market sprang into gear. Its impact on society was so violent that, almost instantly, and without any prior change in opinion, powerful protective reactions set in. (Polanyi, 2001, p. 225)

In words that resonate in today's global market economy, Polanyi described the purpose of such protective intervention in the mechanism of the self-regulating market:

to rehabilitate the lives of men and their environment, to give them some security of status, intervention necessarily aimed at reducing the flexibility of wages and the mobility of labor, giving stability to incomes, continuity to production, introducing public control of national resources, and the management of currencies in order to avoid unsettling changes in the price level. (p. 225)

Over and over again, the ravages of the self-regulating market were offset by social movements that advocated for such life protections as minimum wages, safe working conditions, prohibition of child labour, unemployment insurance, and public education. One early social movement was the Mechanics' Institute movement, which arose in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution to meet the educational needs of working-class adults. More recently, the fair trade movement has joined the long line of social movements of protection.

### **The Fair Trade Movement**

As one of the new social movements, the fair trade movement began to take shape in the 1960s in response to what was then understood as rising neo-imperialism. The movement promotes standards for international labour, environmentalism, and social policy in areas related to production of fair trade-labelled and unlabelled goods (Wikipedia, 2007). Based on the guarantee of fair pricing, not market pricing, fair trade can be understood as "a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seeks better trading conditions for, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers, especially in the South" (European Fair Trade Association, 2001). As an alternative market system, it "aims to right the historically inequitable terms of trade between the geopolitical North and South and foster more direct producer/consumer linkages" (Jaffee et al., 2004, p. 169). In short, "fair trade focuses on the conditions of production and commercialization of specific groups of producers, that is, the cooperatives of small peasant producers or plantations with which there exists a relationship and [which] meet registration criteria" (Renard, 2003, p. 91).

Operating both "in, as well as against, the market" (Raynolds, 2002, p. 419), fair trade is part of the social economy that has social and environmental goals rather than self-maximizing ones. For example,

Generalizing across commodities, at a minimum, fair trade standards are enacted by a price premium, a guaranteed price floor, long-term trading contracts, easier access to credit, and shorter supply chains. In turn, the cooperatives growing these products must be democratically organized and utilize the fair trade premium for the benefit of members. Also, producers commit themselves to improving the environmental conditions of production by reducing or avoiding pesticide use. (Goodman, 2004, p. 897)

In a world that increasingly experiences the negative economic, social, and environmental impacts of the global market (Sumner, 2005a), fair trade "is not just a theoretical option but a practical alternative that's already in place" (Ransom, 2001, p. 134). In this way, the fair trade movement has both descriptive and normative aspects — an already-existing alternative that also acts as a model for more sustainable ways of life. This practical vision has become one of those spaces of hope that adult educators can find, foster and serve.

#### **Adult Education, Fair Trade, and a Market Where We All Fit**

"The end of market society means in no way the absence of markets" (Polanyi, 2001, p. 260). Just as the self-regulating market was deliberately constructed, so can other sorts of markets. A market where we all fit would be a form of the civil commons — that is, "a co-operative human construct that protects and/or enables universal access to life goods" (McMurtry, 1999b, p. 1). Such a market would be embedded within community, a site of social learning and a complement to a sustainable society. Instead of being disembedded from social relations, with society bent to serve market needs, the market would be a fully functioning part of a society that was not based on individual gain but on human and environmental well-being.

How does adult education help the fair trade movement to create a market where we all fit? As Morris (2005) has argued, all social movements have an adult educational dimension, and the fair trade movement is no exception. It is a site of social learning not only for movement members, but also for people outside the movement. According to Hall and Clover (2005), learning for the two groups can occur in both informal and intentional ways. Within the movement, people can learn in informal ways by simply being part of the movement — learning about the details of fair trade, the requirements for certification, and the range of products involved. Learning occurs in intentional ways through adult education classes for fair trade farmers in the global South, and workshops and site visits for those involved in the movement in the global North. Outside the movement, learning occurs in informal ways through reading labels, accessing the media, and talking to sellers of fair trade products as well as other customers, family, and friends. And learning occurs in intentional ways through attending meetings, watching videos, and seeking out information on the Internet.

Hall and Clover (2005) maintain that "social movements are privileged locations for the creation of knowledge" and thus are "epistemic communities" (p. 584). The fair trade movement's goals of social change and economic justice open up spaces for creating the kind of knowledge that aligns with Nesbit's (2006) vision of the practice of an adult

education that creates “really useful knowledge” ( p. 17) and a more equitable world. The movement offers a number of learning opportunities that can lead to the production of such knowledge, accompanied by the possibility of a more equitable world. For example, labels help to inform consumers about which products are certified fair trade. Posters advertise fair trade practices and encourage people to participate. Fair trade Web sites let customers know where to purchase fair trade products. Fair trade stores provide information for curious consumers. Fair trade videos show viewers what selling products in the hypercompetitive global market means to farmers in the global South — hardship, hunger, and bankruptcy — and how fair trade can change this climate of exploitation. Public talks can galvanize people to support fair trade, as with the women’s groups in the global North that have voted to support Cafe Femenino, a fair trade coffee co-operative made up of Peruvian women farmers who have been abused and marginalized. Product tastings work to break down the un/false consciousness of consumers, pulling back the commodifying veil that obscures the unfairness embedded within conventional trade. Some fair trade outlets, such as Planet Bean in Guelph, Ontario, mirror the fair trade requirement that farmers in the global South form co-operatives by forming workers’ co-operatives in the global North, thus educating employees and customers about co-operative practices. A number of restaurants and grocery stores have begun to stock fair trade products, providing an opportunity for people to begin to change their behaviour by making a different set of consumer choices on a daily basis. Finally, fair trade supply chains model an alternative economy based on co-operation and justice, not competition and exploitation. By contributing to a market where we all fit — not where we all ultimately fail through ongoing economic, social, and environmental degradation — they are the living repudiation of Margaret Thatcher’s infamous declaration that “there is no alternative” to the current global market. In all these ways, the alliance of the fair trade movement and adult education creates an epistemic community that can use its really useful knowledge to work toward a market where we all fit and, thus, a more equitable world.

Adult education for social change does not hinge on one kind of learning or a single form of knowledge. It thrives in a matrix of incremental realization that varies from person to person and group to group. This is why social movements offer such rich environments for adult education. They can open up opportunities for transformative learning (Finger & Asún, 2001; Welton, 1993), lifelong learning (Sumner, 2005b), experiential learning (Clover & Hall, 2000; Finger, 1989), and informal learning (Foley, 1999), as well as learning our way out (Finger & Asún, 2001) of unsustainable worldviews and learning our way in (Sumner, 2003) to more sustainable ways of life.

The epistemic communities formed by social movements can be understood from several theoretical perspectives. For example, Habermas’s (1978) three knowledge domains, all of which he considered important to human interests, could be used as a framework for analyzing the epistemic communities that form within social movements. His triad of empirical-analytical knowledge, historical-hermeneutic knowledge, and critical-emancipatory knowledge could be fruitfully applied to the forms of knowledge produced in progressive movements like the fair trade movement, thus providing a framework for thinking about effective adult education initiatives.

Another approach involves Finger and Asún's (2001) explanation of endogenous knowledge creation versus exogenous knowledge transmission. Created in learning environments, endogenous knowledge is "the very essence of adult education" (p. 142). It has a political dimension (learning as a people's tool), an institutional dimension (learning by all), and an epistemological dimension (learning from the world). In contrast, exogenous knowledge is transmitted through educational situations. It involves education as a tool of the system and transmits education about the world. The popular, democratic knowledge created by social movements such as the fair trade movement contrasts with the expert knowledge transmitted by educational institutions that promote business as usual, including the unfair conventional trade of the global market.

The epistemic communities that are formed by social movements and can be fostered and served by adult educators not only create knowledge, but also share it, in contrast to the so-called knowledge economy where knowledge is privatized and sold to the highest bidder. In this way, they help to destabilize the neo-liberal knowledge claims about the normalcy of exploitation that is inherent in current market thinking, leading to a market where we all fit.

### **Conclusion**

In a market where we all fit, fair trade would no longer be an oxymoron. All trade would be fair: building the civil commons and creating really useful knowledge, while ensuring a just livelihood and protecting the environment. In the words of David Ransom (2001), "the point is to restore to trade its essential purpose — either it enhances human well-being as a whole or it is a worthless enterprise that enriches some, impoverishes many more and gets us all precisely nowhere" (p. 26). In order to accomplish the task of restoring trade to its essential purpose and creating a market where we all fit, the fair trade movement must continue to find partners and make alliances.

Following Nesbit's (2006) three main and enduring traditions, adult education can forge an even more solid partnership with the fair trade movement than it has already developed. The first tradition involves "a set of unyielding social purposes, informed by passion and outrage and rooted in a concern for the less privileged" (p. 17). The progressive social purposes of adult education easily align with the goal of the fair trade movement — to ensure fair treatment in the market for primary producers — while the same passion and outrage against the maltreatment of vulnerable people inform members of both groups. This fundamental alignment allows adult educators to collaborate on current projects with the fair trade movement without compromise and to support the creation of new initiatives, such as fair trade flowers.

The second tradition involves "a systematic and sustained philosophical and critical analysis that develops the abilities to connect immediate, individual experiences with underlying societal structures" (Nesbit, 2006, p. 17). With this in mind, adult educators can use their analytic capacities to help producers link their poverty and oppression to the mechanisms of the global market, which are deliberately structured to be unfair. This can be accomplished through such learning activities as workshops, guerrilla theatre, and community murals.



Nesbit's (2006) third tradition involves "a keen attention to the specific sites, locations, and practices where such purposes and analyses are made real in the lives of Canadians" (p. 17). Through a combination of unyielding purpose and critical analysis, adult educators can continue to work with primary producers and to bring the message of fair trade to Canadian consumers. In addition, they can help to open up the fair trade concept to include not only farmers in the global South, but also farmers within Canada whose realized net farm income is essentially zero (National Farmers Union, 2003).

The partnership between adult education and the fair trade movement could help to usher in what might be called the second great transformation: a society based on fair trade and other co-operative human constructs — a society that transcends the self-regulating market and consciously subordinates it to the kind of social regulation that enhances human and environmental well-being. In the words of the European Fair Trade Association, "The fundamental characteristic of fair trade is that of equal partnership and respect . . . The idea of the 'invisible hand' has given way to the idea of working 'hand in hand', with the market regulated by democratic authorities" (in Reynolds, 2002, p. 410).

Adult education has a role to play in the transcendence from a market society to a more democratic society by finding, fostering, and serving the pockets of hope in progressive social movements like the fair trade movement. It can facilitate social movement learning among both movement members and the general public. It can encourage the production of really useful knowledge for a more equitable world. It can steward the knowledge commons that emerges from social movements. And it can encourage the transformative learning that is required for the realization of a more sustainable society. Promoting fair trade, in turn, helps to not only create a market where we all fit, but also globalize other aspects of the civil commons, such as co-operatives, public education, and universal healthcare, thus promoting what has been termed "sustainable globalization" (Sumner, 2005a, p. 124).

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