

Fair Trade

The fair trade movement has been one of the most enduring and successful civic initiatives to come out of the 1960s. In the first transnational history of the movement, Peter van Dam charts its ascendance and highlights how activists attempted to transform the global market in the aftermath of decolonization. Through original archival research into the trade of handicrafts, sugar, paper, coffee, and clothes, van Dam demonstrates how the everyday, material aspects of fair trade activism connected the international politics of decolonization with the daily realities of people across the globe. He explores the different scales at which activists operated and the instruments they employed in the pursuit of more equitable economic relations between the Global South and North. Through careful analysis of a now ubiquitous global movement, van Dam provides a vital new lens through which to view the history of humanitarianism in the age of postcolonial globalization.

Peter van Dam is Professor of Dutch History at the University of Amsterdam. He has published extensively on the history of fair trade activism, sustainable consumption, and the role of religion in civic engagement.

‘Fair trade has been an amazingly resilient idea, and Peter van Dam brilliantly analyzes how that rallying cry has evolved since the 1950s. His history offers many provocative insights into the activism born of globalization.’

Adam Rome, University at Buffalo

‘These days, “fair trade” evokes associations of product labels and certification schemes. In his book *Fair Trade: Humanitarianism in the Age of Postcolonial Globalization*, Peter van Dam offers a rich historical account of the transnational fair trade movement. He shows how certification was only one of many strategies discussed by activists to make global trade relations more just. The movement was much more diverse than present-day associations might suggest, and contestation about the goals and means of fair trade a constant in its history.’

Liesbeth van de Grift, Utrecht University

‘This groundbreaking and elegantly written study on the fair trade movement is a real treat. By positioning his protagonists between local activism and the emergence of a global humanitarian “market place”, Peter van Dam has written a book that will soon become a standard reference for historians in the field.’

Daniel Roger Maul, University of Oslo

‘This exploration of how principled but practical people have evolved and negotiated Fair Trade principles and material practices is a timely reminder of the intricate connections between Fair Trade and social justice movements at multiple levels – indeed, its roots in transnational collaboration and advocacy for economic justice.’

Anne Tallontire, University of Leeds

‘Peter van Dam’s book is a must-read for anyone interested in global social movements, humanitarianism, and postcolonialism. The meticulously researched book shows that fair trade movements and decolonization have been siblings since the 1950s. In troubled times, Peter van Dam encourages us to think about the role of hope in local activism, about alternative economies in global capitalism, and about the attempts to diminish social inequalities. Although the movement failed to achieve the latter, the local lens provides us with historical examples of global relations, political struggles, and international solidarity that will be indispensable as the climate crisis progresses.’

Sandra Maß, Ruhr-Universität Bochum

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Humanitarianism in the Age of Postcolonial Globalization

Peter van Dam
University of Amsterdam



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It is a sobering task to confront the long succession of attempts to avert an unfolding global disaster, only to realize the issue remains as daunting as ever. Since the reordering of global relations after the Second World War, people across the world have persistently denounced global inequality, addressing politicians, businesses, and their fellow citizens. Proposed actions have ranged from new international trade agreements to ‘true’ pricing that would account for the payment of a living wage as well as environmental impact.

The history this book recounts is thus a sorrowful history. We have not been able to do justice to one another and to the planet we live on. Humanity’s ability to create a just and sustainable world has proved to be very limited. In fact, relationships amongst people and to the planet have on the whole become less sustainable during the waves of global interconnection which have unfolded since 1945. On a planet which is heating up, these sustained inequities yield a frightening prospect. If we haven’t been able to change the way we live to right these injustices, how will we be able to cope with the advance of climate change? This book presents a reckoning with the persistent injustices addressed by fair trade activists over the past seventy years. It is through the attempts of those who did try to change the world for the better that this reckoning comes into view.

But in writing the history of people who have taken action against injustice, a history of fair trade should offer more than an indictment of our current predicament. Despite the failure to achieve change on a grand scale, the humanitarian impulse to at least make a difference for *some* people in *some* places has driven people to engage in a wide range of activities to promote fair trade.

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Their histories enhance our understanding of the changing material, political, economic, and social conditions that shape global connections. They also highlight the importance of specific practices like selling products, boycotting, and meeting like-minded individuals, activities that have enabled people to engage with fair trade over a long period of time.

The history of fair trade thus brings to the fore a distinct phase in the history of globalization, characterized in this book as ‘postcolonial globalization’. During this period, many attempts to achieve a more sustainable world emphasized socio-economic inequality over environmental concerns. At the same time, the history of fair trade activism demonstrates how activities promoting fair trade were often mindful of the environment. Activists participated in rallies for environmental causes, sold recycled paper, and applied the notion of sustainable development to the work carried out in fields and orchards. Now, at a time when climate justice is a key issue and climate activists apparently have to prepare for long-term engagement, the history of fair trade is highly relevant. The constant manoeuvring between achieving small steps and effecting meaningful large-scale change remains similarly instructive.

Fair trade’s history has occupied me for the last twelve years. In 2012, I had the good fortune to receive funding for this work by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). In the ensuing years, I was even more fortunate to work with colleagues across the globe and to meet people formerly and currently involved in the fair trade movement. They shared their knowledge, experiences, and sometimes even their archives with me. I continue to admire the capacity of many fair trade activists to engage in critical reflection and think about their engagement despite the exigencies of their pressing daily affairs. Contrary to the popular image, scholarship is very much the work of many hands: interlocutors, librarians and archivists, colleagues, reviewers and editors, family and friends, hosts, and babysitters. It would take a separate book to thank all the people that have accompanied me during this protracted voyage. I am immensely grateful to all of them.

Being this long in the making, this book is a composite of sorts. Many earlier publications are complemented with material I had previously not been able to discuss, along with new insights. The book draws its overarching structure from my 2018 book on

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the Dutch fair trade movement, *Wereldverbeters: een geschiedenis van fair trade* (Amsterdam University Press). The individual chapters combine material from that book with previously published articles and new material. Chapter 1 reworks sections of ‘No Justice without Charity: Humanitarianism after Empire’ from *The International History Review*.¹ Chapter 2 presents a revised version of ‘Goodbye to Grand Politics: The Cane Sugar Campaign and the Limits of Transnational Activism, 1968–1974’ from *Contemporary European History*.² Parts of Chapter 4 have previously been presented in the chapter ‘Challenging Global Inequality in Streets and Supermarkets: Fair Trade Activism since the 1960s’ from the edited volume *Histories of Global Inequality: New Perspectives*.³ Where particular passages explicitly build on other relevant previous publications, these prior contributions are referenced. Compared to my earlier publications, I have devoted greater attention in this book to the transnational dynamics of the fair trade network, the materiality of activism, and the relation of these insights to the broader historiography.

As I was preparing to write this book, the COVID-19 pandemic exploded on the world. It highlighted the importance of understanding how the world had become globally interconnected in a highly unequal fashion. The pandemic proved challenging even in the privileged living conditions that my family and I enjoyed in Amsterdam. The delay of a book manuscript surely was the least of our worries. Nonetheless, finally seeing it realized provides an opportunity to look back on those years and to thank those who lived through those days with me – Beatrix above all.

ABBREVIATIONS

CCC	Clean Clothes Campaign
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Fair Trade Association
FLO	Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International
GEPA	Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Partnerschaft mit der Dritten Welt
IFAT	International Federation for Alternative Trade
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
SERVV	Sales Exchange for Refugee Rehabilitation Vocations
SOS	Stichting Ontwikkelings-Samenwerking (Stichting Steun Ontwikkelings-Streken until 1972)
UCIRI	Unión de Comunidades Indígenas del Región del Istmo
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WDM	World Development Movement
WFTO	World Fair Trade Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization