

The Moralization of Coffee



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The Sustainable Coffee Activist Network

Background

The sustainable coffee activist network divides neatly into three general groupings with human rights and labor groups making up the largest of the movement's subdivision. Activists in this first category are primarily concerned with the low wages received by farmers, which sometimes plummet below the cost of production, as well as the endless cycle of poverty and debt they see coffee farmers as being trapped in. These groups advocate Fair Trade coffee and press for companies to become Fair Trade certified. Oxfam, Global Exchange, and TransFair are some of the key Fair Trade players.

Migratory bird and environmental groups form the movement's second subdivision, which includes such groups as the Seattle Audubon Society, Conservation International, and the Songbird Foundation. Preserving the wintering grounds of migratory birds, which are fast being cleared and replaced by sun-grown, or 'technified,' coffee plantations, is the principal concern of this category. Convincing coffee companies to become shade certified, a type of certification just now coming on line, is the main goal of this subdivision.

The third and smallest group includes organic consumers who push for organic coffee and organic certification. They oppose genetically engineered coffee beans as well as the use of agro-chemicals on coffee plantations. Organic certification is a harder sell than both shade and Fair Trade certification because it costs the individual farmer a large sum of money. Therefore, many of the activists in this group, like the Organic Consumers Association (OCA), have devoted a large part of their efforts to supporting one of the movement's other two subdivisions.

The Moralization of Coffee

I first met with the notion of sustainable coffee on a surprisingly sunny spring day in 1998 while quarantined in the back row of my tenth grade biology class. My teacher, Mr. Baker, who shaved only once a year, posed classic rock trivia questions for extra-credit on tests, and habitually began each class with a moralistic pontification, opened that day's session by asking if there was anyone among us who knew what shade coffee was. Of course, none of us did, but, thanks to the worldly nature of our teacher, we had soon learned that birds liked shade coffee plantations, and, if we liked birds, we should ask for shade coffee at our favorite coffee shop. It was grassroots activism in its most basic form. My temporary enlightenment, however, ended there, and sustainable coffee became nothing more than a forgotten, dust-covered volume, stored on a bookshelf in the attic of my mind.

Fast-forward to the present, another surprisingly sunny spring day, this time in 2002. Sustainable coffee, and the movement surrounding it, has been at the forefront of my mind for a few months now and an entire library has replaced that single dust-covered volume. What began as a passing conversation about birds and shade has evolved into the focus of a quarter-long research project delving into the inner workings of international advocacy networks. I, however, am not alone in my increased awareness of such movements and it is not by chance that I have stumbled upon them. The presence, influence, and relevance of these networks in our society has increased dramatically in recent years and has caused traditional understandings of global politics to require reexamination.

The close of the twentieth century found a global political landscape traveled by an increasingly diverse group of actors. What was once the exclusive territory of sovereign states has grown to include a multitude of newcomers operating outside of the traditional state-oriented

framework and jostling with states for influence over the international system. Among these new actors are the dense webs of issue specific activist networks with which I am concerned. You have heard the slogans, seen the bumper stickers, and received the e-mails: free Tibet, free Burma, save the whales, save the rainforest, boycott Nike, boycott Starbucks, and so forth. You know them, they find their way into our lives them often enough. They are the voices of activist networks; and, after letting the voices of the sustainable coffee movement wash over my thoughts for a quarter, a clearer picture of intra-network solidarity, discord, and activities has resulted...

Solidarity

Activists in each of the sustainable coffee movement's three subdivisions generally regard actors, and messages, from each of the other two subdivisions as beneficial to the movement as a whole. This is partly due to the basic nature of most sustainable coffee activists. Activists who advocate higher standards of living for third world populations tend to believe in rainforest preservation and have a propensity to oppose the sort of industrialized agriculture that employs genetic engineering and injects massive quantities of chemicals into the biosphere. Personal ideals, however, although often rationalizing the opinions of groups toward one another and carrying cooperation to a higher level, do not sufficiently justify most instances of collaboration within the sustainable coffee movement. Furthermore, they do not explain the frequency with which activist organizations seek out coalition partners. Activists seek out partners and instigate cooperation, not simply because they have similar moral ideals, but rather because it is in their best interest to do so.

Like states in neo-liberal philosophy, or political parties in a multi-partied parliament, activist organizations band together to form coalitions because doing so usually enables them to

more affectively achieve their goals. Activist organizations, by forming links, are able to reach out to different constituencies of concern and draw in otherwise out of range audiences, thereby increasing the overall force behind their message. Global Exchange's Melissa Schweisgut, in a mid-April interview, explained, "If everyone were highlighting human rights issues, then people who were concerned with the environment, or about birds, would not be pulled into the issue [of Fair Trade]." Similar opinions emanate from all factions of the movement and the usefulness of different angles enjoys across the board recognition.

A joint lecture in late May demonstrated both the constituent recruitment alluded to by Melissa and the advantage of multiple angles. Helen Ross of the Seattle Audubon Society and Deborah James of Global Exchange presented two perspectives on sustainable coffee in a lively auditorium at the University of Washington's Bothell campus. Presumably, part of the audience had come for Deborah and Fair Trade, and the rest for Helen and shade coffee. However, the words of both activists drifted over the entire audience and each attendee came away with the messages of both women regardless of their original reason for attending.

Deborah began by recounting the history of coffee cultivation and then explained the importance of Fair Trade, all from the perspective of a human rights advocate; but laced into her closing sentences were messages from both camps. As she asked those before her to make a choice, she spoke with one voice but reached out to two passions with forceful resolve. "We can choose the model that uproots the trees, that destroys animal habitat, that poisons our rivers and streams [and keeps] farmers in a stranglehold of poverty and debt," she explained, or, we can choose the model that "gives some hope for the future." There was the connection. Fair Trade and shade coffee go hand in hand, and, if any of the audience members were interested in

becoming more involved in either organization on that night's program, information was available at a table near the main exit.

It is true; the issues surrounding the various forms of sustainable coffee do go hand in hand and fit nicely into a single thought. However, activist organizations still tend to focus almost entirely on their most fundamental message while placing others on the backburner. Helen Ross, in her lecture, spoke of birds, showed slides of birds, and mimicked the songs of birds. Fair Trade remained in the background. Thus, if the Seattle Audubon is to recruit Fair Trade supporters, and if Fair Trade supporters are to become aware of the problem facing migratory birds, cooperation becomes necessary. As a result, the lecture hall in Bothell hosted two speakers, the Seattle Audubon Society's web page houses a link to Global exchange, and both issue specific organizations are free to do what they do best. As the Audubon's Ashley Parkinson observed, "you cannot grow environmentally sound coffee if you are not paying attention to the farmers...but at the same time our organizations have different messages." Multiple angles speed success but require multiple actors.

Although multiple angles are important to a network, the network's individual organizations must focus on succinct, specifically targeted messages. Consequently, individual organizations do not adopt all available angles and the world of activist networks has therefore evolved into the political equivalent of digital cable. Herein lies its success. While conventional politics have retained the overly broad lethargy of 1950's network television, activist networks speak directly to a specific audience and do not have to placate multiple constituencies. They supply individuals with a vast array of topics from which to choose the one best fitting their own chosen lifestyle identity. Similarly, when each individual organization within a network adopts a different angle, they present the post-modern citizen the opportunity to select the angle directly

complimenting their chosen lifestyle image. Why bother with a conventional political party speaking to millions of dissimilar constituents when you can join the specific segment of a network speaking directly to you? In short, organizations are more successful when viewing an issue from a single angle, enabling them to speak directly to a likeminded group, but networks, as a whole, are more effective when supplying a host of angles. As a result, collaboration is in the best interest of most network participants.

Discord

If activists seek out partners and instigate cooperation because it is in their best interest to do so, then, disassociation and disfavor between activist organizations must occur because cooperation is counterproductive. Cooperation becomes counterproductive, not because of differing angles, but rather because of conflicting strategies. While all participants in the sustainable coffee network hold the same fundamental beliefs, their organizations' strategies can be vastly dissimilar. This sort of dissimilarity prompted Ashley of the Seattle Audubon to describe the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) as "very confused." In further elaborations, she explained the reasons behind her opinion. The OCA "had our logo on their website saying 'Starbucks kills birds'...we have different tactics...we are trying to work on the more positive end [of the movement]. We would not," she continued, "with our logo, be saying 'Starbucks kills birds'...because, when you are working with companies, when you 'company bash' Starbucks, in a sense, you are hitting all those companies and they do not appreciate it."

Ashley's comments shed light on the main cause of disparity within the sustainable coffee movement. As far as strategies are concerned, there are two extremes—the activists and the educators. At one end of the continuum, are the more radical and extremely anti-corporate

organizations like the OCA, who wield an energetic brand of activism, and at the other, are the more education-oriented groups like the Seattle Audubon, who try to pitch stories to the media while working with companies rather than against them. Both extremes have similar goals; both support sustainable coffee and oppose the technified varieties. However, their chosen strategies have caused them to view each other as confused and have rendered cooperation, from the perspective of the educators at least, as counterproductive.

This does not mean that activists and educators never work together, they usually do; but, when the distance between their strategies becomes too great, as with the OCA and the Seattle Audubon, the educator will avoid ties to the activist. From the perspective of the OCA, a group like the Seattle Audubon may be pursuing a somewhat Sisyphean strategy, but linking to them may still spread the OCA's message. In contrast, if the Seattle Audubon is to gain the ear of coffee companies, they must disassociate themselves from the groups who, in the words of Ashley Parkinson, "company bash."

The Seattle Audubon, however, does see activism as important and therefore works with less extreme activist organizations such as Global Exchange. "You definitely need people who are pushing on companies at the same time as you need people who are supporting companies," remarked Ashley. Her reasoning: sometimes working with companies fails to yield results and necessitates a less friendly approach; but, because the Seattle Audubon has to preserve its company friendly image, it is up to an activist organization to get the job done—although preferably not the OCA.

This type of discord, however, is uncommon and occurs only between groups at opposite ends of the spectrum. Global Exchange, like most other groups in the sustainable coffee movement, finds itself closer to the center of the continuum than the OCA and thus enjoys links

to both of the continuum's fringes. Upon being asked for her thoughts on the OCA, Deborah James energetically replied, "I like them." Global Exchange and the OCA are both avid activists and, while the OCA may display more contempt towards coffee companies, the organizations would naturally regard each other with favor and benefit from joint protests. Cooperation, like that between the OCA and Global Exchange, or between Global Exchange and the Seattle Audubon, usually benefits both actors. Discord, when it occurs, is typically the result of drastically differing strategies that render cooperation counterproductive.

Campaigns

Just as individuals seek out activist organizations that compliment their own self-image and personal value system, activist organizations select campaign targets, based in part, on the lifestyle images these targets project. The socially and environmentally conscious image of Starbucks for instance, one that consumers contentedly associate with and adopt as part of their own identity, has caused the company to become the Nike of the coffee industry and the object of activists' contempt. Starbucks' image, and the size to which this image has allowed the company to grow, has caused them to become the target of a worldwide campaign attempting to inject new meanings into the Starbucks brand. The campaign holds that Starbucks is neither socially nor environmentally conscious, and in fact harms both the environment and the global social atmosphere—a claim that does not sit well with Starbucks' customers. By upsetting Starbucks' customers, the campaign is attempting to effect change on the entire coffee industry. Starbucks has become a target, not because it necessarily commits more social and environmental wrongs than other coffee companies, but because it is an industry icon and has developed a strong and therefore easily targeted lifestyle image.

The quest by activist organizations for a campaign that allows them to target specific lifestyle identities can sometimes draw organizations into arenas where they would normally seem out of place. The Organic Consumers Association, whose main goal is to secure the removal of rBGH from all domestic milk, has decided that this goal can be most effectively achieved by targeting Starbucks. This seems absurd at first. Why not target Darigold or even Albertson's? The catch lies in the lifestyle image. While Darigold and Albertson's both have images, they are not necessarily lifestyle images. Albertson's customers come in all shapes and sizes. Starbucks customers, on the other hand, tend to see themselves as worldly, socially and environmentally conscious, individuals—the type more likely to be concerned with hormones in milk.

As the OCA began to target Starbucks regarding their rBGH concerns, the Fair Trade issue started to draw them in. They have since formed a close working alliance with Global Exchange and, as Melissa Schweisgut explained, they “have really picked up the Starbucks campaign.” Both organizations have an online network of independent activists and sympathizers to which they continuously disperse campaign messages, but differ in their primary goals. The OCA's main objective is to force Starbucks to remove all genetically engineered dairy products from its product line, while the aim of Global Exchange is to improve the working and living conditions of coffee farmers. However, by interlinking their networks of activists and signing on to each other's goals, the two organizations are able to increase their weight while achieving their individual goals simultaneously and gaining an ally.

Flavors

During her lecture in Bothell, Deborah, while speaking about Starbucks, commented that Fair Trade “is still a flavor to them.” This observation provokes some interesting thoughts. It is true; post-modern society, with its emphasis on choice, would tend to prompt Starbucks into the frame of mind depicted by Deborah. If people want Fair Trade, why not give them the choice; but for those who want it simple, give them what they have always had. Let it be a favor—a low-fat white chocolate mocha or a shade-grown, Fair Trade latté with soymilk. This differing perception is the source of Deborah’s frustration. If coffee companies are able to satisfy their customers by simply offering what amounts to a new flavor, they will. It then remains up to the activist network to cause the clientele of companies to demand that sustainable coffee become more than just a flavor. We will see what happens...

Thoughts

As I sit in my room, my head enveloped in a whirlwind of advocacy networks, I realize that I have done nothing more than wade ankle deep in the vast ocean of activism that covers our globe. I have learned a great deal however, and, as an added bonus, I have come away with quite a few small sample bags of shade, Fair Trade, and organic coffee, given to me by the various activists I have spoken with. I am now also a member of countless sustainable coffee list-serves—a ramification of e-mailing a set of questions to every coffee related activist organization I could find. Today has already presented me with ten sustainable coffee-related e-mails and it is not yet noon. The voices of activist networks are at work all around us: buy organic, drink Fair Trade, and love the shade.