Understanding Coffee Activism, Ethical Consumption and Political Consumerism

Coffee activism, market growth and fair trade consumption

The importance of coffee to the world economy cannot be overstated. It is one of the most valuable primary products in world trade, for many years second in value only to oil as a source of foreign exchange to producing countries. Its cultivation, processing, trading, transportation and marketing provide employment for hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Coffee is crucial to the economies and politics of many developing countries; for many of the world’s least developed countries (LDCs), exports of coffee account for more than 50 per cent of their foreign exchange earnings. (International Coffee Organization)

‘Coffee activism’ is an umbrella term for the fair trade movement and actors beyond the official network. This single-issue type of activism includes a number of voices and agendas that range from the more directly political to those which are more consumer oriented. It is a polymorphous cause which involves the fair trade movement, as well as initiatives which are concerned with the promotion of ethical practice and conditions in the chain of global coffee trade. These include solidarity campaigns, cooperatives and alternative trade organisations (ATOs), as well as eco-labelling schemes and other certification labels. Coffee activism has undergone a variety of alterations in its growth since its inception as a social and trade justice movement, offering an alternative model for international trade,
and has transformed into a mix of ‘campaigning traders’ and ‘trading campaigners’. It has also been adopted and adapted by corporate commercial enterprises that have entered its market, transforming it from niche to mainstream. Coffee activism seeks to balance trade injustice by setting and activating mechanisms which protect the ‘global South’ and raising awareness in the ‘global North’. In doing so, the movement encompasses a variety of principles on social and environmental justice issues. Fair trade is primarily concerned with the promotion of the motto and practice of a ‘fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work’, as well as an environmental, developmental and gender equality agenda.

Importantly, coffee activism is both a movement and a market. As such, it requires a thorough exploration of the politics of consumption; coffee activism constitutes one of the most sustained types of ethical consumption, or, in terms of political science, political consumerism. Participation in coffee activism includes a range of practices from single-consumer preference to fully committed engagement in protesting and lobbying, as well as the boycotting of unethical coffee trade. One might be involved in coffee activism through one’s church, by supporting their Sunday stall of Traidcraft goods, or through one’s local supermarket, by purchasing that brand of coffee with that blue and green design on a black background that is the Fairtrade Mark. One can also be more enthusiastically engaged by attending regular meetings at a borough campaigning group (a group concerned with bringing fair trade principles and accreditation to the local community) or maybe a march organised by the Trade Justice Movement (TJM) or a coffee morning during Fairtrade Fortnight. The fair trade movement has grown its roots in contemporary British society through a variety of organisations and means, and the majority of consumers across this country can now readily identify the Fairtrade Mark and are familiar with its basic connotations. Coffee activism has been gaining impetus as a powerful form of consumer politics. The phenomenon reflects the contemporary complexity of citizenship which touches upon different realms of our everyday lives and most appreciably that of consumption. This book outlines the ambivalent position of ethical fair trade consumption as an act of consumer citizenship. Rather than merely discussing consumer agency in the marketplace, I also reflect on civic agency in the political space. Consequently, the analysis focuses on the digital