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Volume 15, 2010 - [Issue 3](#)

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Pages 457-470 | Published online: 09 Sep 2010

Cite this article <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460903288213>

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COMMENTARY

Fair Trade, Free Trade and the State

GAVIN FRIDELL

In autumn 2007, I was contacted by a staff member of a new policy journal on the Americas and asked to submit an article on fair trade for an upcoming issue on corporate social responsibility. I was surprised by this request, given that my own work draws heavily on critical political economy and the journal is jointly run by the Americas Society and the Council of the Americas, the latter being a 'premier international business organization' whose corporate members share an explicit devotion to promoting free trade and 'open markets'.¹ I expressed some hesitation to the staff member, who assured me that fair trade issues were of particular interest to the journal's readership. She then added that the editors wanted me to develop an article that was 'forward-looking' and went beyond the basic issues of fair trade to advance a broader policy point. I replied that this would be an excellent idea, as I could write a piece arguing for the need for national and international bodies to adopt fair trade as a matter of state policy, which would entail developing strong international regulations for commodity prices and social, labour and environmental standards. After a short pause, the staff member replied 'you can't say that, that's ideological'.

This telling anecdote is demonstrative of a growing attitude among corporate actors and pro-corporate advocates who in the last few years have shown increasing enthusiasm for fair trade, which they view as compatible with the current free trade agenda of international financial institutions and powerful Northern states. This view is at odds not just with my own understanding of fair trade, but, I would argue, with the traditional vision of the majority of fair trade organisations which have, in moral and political terms, generally understood fair trade as a direct challenge to free trade and the overall neoliberal policy package, which includes severe cuts to public spending and the reduction or elimination of capital controls, protectionist barriers, and market regulations (EFTA 2001, FLO 2001, IFAT 2001, Oxfam International 2002). Yet the growing enthusiasm of free trade supporters for fair trade is not without basis. In fact, in this commentary I will argue that the current, non-statist orientation of the fair trade network, whose growth has been driven by voluntarist commitments by private corporations, is much more

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ISSN 1356-3467 print; ISSN 1469-9923 online/10/030457-14 © 2010 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13563460903288213

The author would like to thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for project funding. Special thanks to Cecil Ryan and all of those who agreed to be interviewed in SVG, as well as Kate Ervine, Mark Gabbert, Cecilia Green, Martijn Konings, Liisa North, Marcus Taylor and Alissa Trotz.

See the Council of the Americas, <http://coa.counciloftheamericas.org/page.php?k=about> [Accessed 18 November 2008].

These perspectives are emphasised to varying degrees by different authors (see Fridell [2006](#)).

Cecil Ryan (Chairman of SVBGA), Interviews with Author, 9 and 31 July 2008; Lesley Grant (SVBGA Manager), Interview with Author, 9 July 2008.

Grant Interview; Sylvester Vanloo (SVBGA Product Manager), Interview with Author, 9 July 2008.

Reuben Robertson (Chief Agricultural Officer, SVG), Interview with Author, 16 July 2008; Ryan Interview; Grant Interview; Vanloo Interview.

Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves (SVG), Interview with Author, 15 July 2008.

Arthur Bobb (WINFA Manager), Interview with Author, 25 July 2008.

These observations are based on 27 interviews with government representatives and farmers conducted in SVG in July 2008 (see also Moberg [2005](#)).

The minimum price for fair trade certified bananas vary by country of origin with the exception of a guaranteed social premium of US\$1 per 40 lb box. In SVG in July 2008, fair trade banana farmers were receiving a farm-gate price of US\$6.78 per 40 lb box, which was about US\$0.76 more than conventional prices (Bobb Interview).

Ryan, Interviews. The prices paid for bananas to WIBDECO are not available for public disclosure. One official, however, stated in March 2009 that the best barometer for prices paid to WIBDECO would be the trends in retail prices of bananas in the UK as it would be unreasonable to assume that the supermarkets would drop their retail prices over a long period of time without demanding a reduction in the export price in the South.

Bobb Interview.

See TransFair USA, Available from:

<http://www.transfairusa.org/content/about/mission.php> [Accessed 26 November 2008].

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