Fair Trade Is Not Impartial  
Negative Case by Nathaniel Arroyave



This resolution seems to come down to the role of government in the market. What we need to avoid at all costs in this debate, especially as the Negative, is a characterization of the Affirmative as completely ridiculous. We will win very few rounds claiming that the other side only houses extremists who want to see Grandma in the poorhouse and will do anything to usher in The New World Order. The danger of this overextension is that the Negative can easily come back and point to a few ‘common-sense regulations’ that the government set in place and come out on top as the reasonable ones in the debate. “We’re not saying the government should run everything,” they can say, “We just believe that the government has a duty to protect people from exploitation.”

The Affirmative’s most powerful weapon will be emotion: “Do you really want a poor family to starve because some suburbanite doesn’t want to pay an extra dollar for coffee?” We cannot allow them to have this. If they ‘pull’ this card, remind the judge that a market involves buyers and sellers, not victims and perpetrators. This isn’t a game of Rich Folks vs. Everyone Else. We have to ask ourselves, “Is it morally right for the government to take from some and give to others just because they are more prosperous?”

We have to show that when the government takes active steps to value fair trade over free trade, bad things tend to happen, thus disqualifying this approach as a rule. We’re not looking for an application war – though I believe the applications in this case withstand the test of scrutiny. Instead, we’re using our applications to prove our logical points. Do remember that as we run this case, this case is meant to prove one general rule, and disprove another general rule: never lose sight of the power of overarching logic. Feel free to use the framework provided, but don’t hesitate to go big picture.

This case seeks to link the impacts that aren’t simply, ‘They cause socialism, which is bad.’ That impact can be a powerful one, if you lay the groundwork in this case properly, but we need some more substance. This case will not reduce the debate to capitalism and socialism. Instead, we’re going to give our opponents as much rope as we can safely give them and use that same rope to tie their case down to our harms. Our main harm? Valuing fair trade over free trade leads to inherent bias in the market. The destruction of justice and impartiality inevitably leads to a loss of economic growth, consumer trust, and, if carried far enough, a loss of essential liberties as well.

When the government ceases to be a referee – applying basic boundaries for all of the players to interact within – and becomes a player – who takes steps to ensure benefits for some even at the cost of others – then we know that bad things are in store.

Negative

If there’s one thing that starts fights in public forums, it’s economic debates. When that happens in the real world, the government, ever helpful, usually steps in. This is where our debate starts today. Renowned economist Milton Friedman points out, “When government – in pursuit of good intentions – tries to rearrange the economy, legislate morality, or help special interests, the cost comes in inefficiency, lack of motivation, and loss of freedom. Government should be a referee, not an active player.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Today, we have a choice between giving everyone the same rules to play by or strong-arming some into giving up their resources to others that we deem more fit. When governments value ‘fair’ trade over free trade, they seek to unfairly benefit some at the cost of others. I hold that when in conflict, governments should value free trade above fair trade.

# Definitions:

**Free Trade:** “A policy to eliminate discrimination against imports and exports. Buyers and sellers from different economies may voluntarily trade without *a government applying* tariffs, quotas, subsidies, or prohibitions on goods and services. *Free trade is the opposite of trade protectionism or economic isolationism*.”[[2]](#footnote-2)  
**Fair Trade:** According to Marc Sidwell, “The Fair-Trade movement believes that free trade harms the poor.” Sidwell lists some of the tenets of the fair-trade movement: “globally-enforced standards on working conditions; the creation of special tariffs to protect developing economies; and trading agreements that will set national export quotas for global commodities.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

A good way to understand these concepts is that Free Trade looks to provide equalities of opportunity and lets individuals do as they choose, while Fair Trade looks to provide equality of outcomes, using the market to take from one group and give to another as they deem fit.

Resolutional Analysis: When in ConflictThe resolution asks whether governments should choose free trade or fair trade. We’re not simply discussing which system is morally bad or which one is morally good. We have to compare their relative advantages and disadvantages.

Resolutional Analysis: As a Rule  
We’re discussing government’s general approach to markets. That means whenever the government is faced with a choice between the two, our decision here determines what the government chooses as a rule.

# Value: Justice

Definition: the quality of being just, impartial, or fair[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Reason to Prefer: Justice is the benchmark of governments.**When we judge whether a government’s actions are good or not, we have to ask if they are acting justly and impartially. Justice is the only consistent benchmark for weighing a government’s actions.

# Contention: Fair Trade Is Not Impartial

Fair trade is the practice of granting certain groups special immunities or privileges in the international market on the pretext that it’s ‘only fair.’ But when the government adopts policies that purposely benefit some groups and harm others, they are not acting impartially; they are being unjust.

## A. ‘Fair’ Trade Is Unjust to Consumers

## Application: U.S. Sugar Industry

Fair Trade policy in the U.S. is most notable within the sugar industry. James Bovard, writing for the Foundation for Economic Education, states, “U.S. prices are routinely double or triple the world sugar price.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Why is this the case? According to Tim Worstall at Forbes, we can trace these “protections” in the name of sugar farmers back to tariffs introduced back in 1789.[[6]](#footnote-6) What is the economic impact of these fair trade protections? According to a study done by the American Enterprise Institute, “The resulting estimated costs to U.S. consumers have averaged $2.4 billion per year, with producers benefiting by about $1.4 billion per year. So, the net cost of income transfers to producers have averaged about $1 billion per year.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The impact of this application is quite clear: **Fair trade treats consumers unjustly, and as such violates government’s purpose.** When governments give certain people privileges at the cost of others, any sense of impartiality is devastated.

Consider the Negative mindset in these situations: they seem to believe we ought to give certain groups of people immunities at the cost of everyone who isn’t them. That is not just.

B. ‘Fair’ Trade Is Unjust to Producers  
Marc Sidwell from the Adam Smith Institute states, “Fair trade does not aid economic development. It operates to keep the poor in their place, sustaining uncompetitive farmers on their land and holding back diversification, mechanization, and moves up the value chain. This denies future generations the chance of a better life.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, Tom Clougherty, the Adam Smith Institute’s policy director, points out, “At best, fair trade is a marketing device that does the poor little good. At worst, it may inadvertently be harming some of the planet’s most vulnerable people.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

## Application: Fair-Trade Coffee

Coffee is an industry that has serious fair-trade backers. But according to an article by Bruce Wydick at the Huffington Post, “The academic evidence for any positive effect of fair-trade coffee on coffee growers is mixed at best.”[[10]](#footnote-10) A study done by economists at UCSD and UC Berkeley discovered (from 13 years of data in Guatemala), “Once rent dissipation mechanisms have been taken into account, it appears to be the case that FT price premiums have been very close to zero.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Engaging in fair-trade in the coffee industry provides little to no benefits to coffee growers. Even those small benefits don’t go to the people who need them most. According to a Harvard study, “the benefits are not evenly distributed. Farm owners and skilled workers benefits from FT [fair-trade], intermediaries are hurt, and hired unskilled workers are unaffected.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The mediocre benefits of fair-trade aren’t even fairly distributed. Fair Trade isn’t fair. It certainly isn’t just. If fair-trade is supposed to be fair, then it should give benefits impartially. Because it doesn’t, the impact is this: **‘fair’ trade purposely gives certain groups of producers benefits without benefiting others. Fair Trade fails the standard of justice and impartially, and as such should not be the government’s approach to trade.**

Fair trade unjustly harms consumers for the sake of producers, and unjustly benefits some producers while ignoring those in the most need. If a policy is not just, it shouldn’t be embraced by the government. **The impact: fair trade should not be the government’s approach to markets.**

# Contention: Free Trade is Impartial

Free trade is inherently impartial – which is the definition of justice. The definition of free trade policy is removing barriers from the market. That means that the market is open to everyone in a particular industry. By its very definition, free trade is more impartial than fair trade.

## A. Free Trade Treats Consumers Impartially

Valuing free trade policies means removing barriers to the market, including preferential policies. Valuing free trade over fair trade is the only way to make the rules apply to all in the market. Free trade means that if you want to buy foreign goods, you can, and if you want to only buy domestic goods, you can. Fair trade insists that certain groups ought to be protected like endangered species, while everyone else has to fend for themselves. Free trade allows consumers to make their own decisions, treating everyone as an equal.

## Application: International Free Trade Agreements

Free trade agreements don’t mean lawlessness in trade. Rather, imports, duties, and quotas are reduced in free trade agreements[[13]](#footnote-13) – meaning that consumers can buy as they choose, regardless of their social standing or nation of origin. This is true impartiality. Pure free-trade agreements say that if you have the money, you can buy it, no matter where you’re from.

B. Free Trade Treats Producers Equally  
Pure free trade policies say that if you want to sell something, you can sell it to anyone, anywhere, regardless of where you’re from or what your last name is. No application is necessary here because this logic is self-evident. When you remove barriers from the entire market, you are treating all producers impartially, meaning that producers have more freedom to innovate, sell, and grow, leading to an overall greater prosperity for all involved, and a greater standard of impartiality on the government’s part. The impact: Free trade is inherently impartial. Why does that matter? Free trade is the only option in this round that is impartial on the government’s part, and as such, is the only option that fulfills the government’s burden to be just.

We must judge a government’s actions by justice and impartiality. Fair trade is biased, insisting that some be protected while others must fend for themselves. Free trade is impartial, allowing everyone to buy and sell as the market allows. Free trade is the only approach in this round that treats everyone equally. **As such, it is the only approach to the market that governments can value justly and impartially.**

Opposing This Case

It’s all well and good for the Negative to expound on the benefits of free trade. Free trade is appealing, when we are the ones who benefit from it. But the Negative has completely ignored those most affected by international trade. It is my contention that free trade is inherently flawed. Free trade always leads to partiality and injustice. This isn’t to say that capitalism is bad, or anything that foolish. However, free trade left unsupervised inherently leads to a separation between those who are wealthier and those who are worse off for the exchange. That isn’t Marxist propaganda. That’s simply fact. Adopting fair trade policies are the most effective way to ensure that everyone is treated equally and justly. After all, if real injustices are being committed and the government does not enact policy to stop them, the government is not acting morally. How can we claim to act morally when we simply allow partiality and inequality to rule our markets?

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