The Free Trade Lie  
Affirmative Case By Drew Magness



This is an aggressive contention-centric case that relies on solid analysis, concrete persuasion, and good numbers to win the debate round. While most affirmative cases right now are focused on a wonky definition of fair trade, or an idealistic value, this case takes the negative right where they want to go: the economy.

The definitions are pretty normal and shouldn’t run you into much trouble. If the negative runs counter-definitions, accept them if at all possible. Same story on the value. Just run the analysis that your value is the most comprehensive one in the debate round and you’ll be able to win the value debate. But most of all, minimize time on these two kinds of arguments. You want the debate round to be about your contentions, not the definitions or value.

On the contentions, your opponent is likely to argue that free trade is more beneficial. Here’s a great line of cross-examination:

“Should we look at what most governments should choose or what a minority of them should choose?”

“Are most countries in the world developed or developing?”

Most are developing. And your analysis shows why developing countries need fair trade to keep their people alive. That’s the winning analysis.

Public Safety

Vishambar is a 35-year-old silk weaver in India. He had a thriving business and pride in his vocation. But in 2005, India implemented “free trade” reforms in the textile industry. Now, Vishambar is starving on the streets. “There is no work,” he says. “I am just sitting and begging… I want work for myself and for other people in the village.”

People deserve an opportunity to work in a job and make enough money to stay alive. That’s what fair trade allows and it’s why I’m happy to support the resolution, “When in conflict, governments ought to value fair trade over free trade.” Let’s make sure we’re on the same page with some

# Definitions

Fair Trade is defined by Merriam Webster as “a movement whose goal is to help producers in developing countries to get a fair price for their products so as to reduce poverty, provide for the ethical treatment of workers and farmers, and promote environmentally sustainable practices.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Free Trade is also defined by Merriam Webster as “Trade based on the unrestricted international exchange of goods with tariffs used only as a source of revenue.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Fair trade is attempting to pay producers a fair price and free trade is taking our hands off trade entirely.

How should you choose between the two sides? To answer that question I provide you with my

# Value – General Welfare

General Welfare is operationally defined as: “The overall health, happiness, and success of people.” Here’s why this is the best way to measure the resolution:

Reason to Prefer: Comprehensive Measure  
We’re talking about what governments that dictate the lives of millions of people should prioritize. That’s a very broad resolution that touches almost every aspect of the lives of people in those nations – and beyond, into the rest of the planet. General Welfare is a value broad enough to keep up with the resolution, giving you the best chance of making an accurate decision.

# Contention 1 - Free Trade Destroys General Welfare

We’ll see why in two subpoints.

## Unnecessary

If it sounds like I’ve gone crazy, it’s because I’m challenging an idea that has been pounded into the minds of everyone in this room. For years, free trade has been exalted as the solution to all the world’s ills. This was a forgivable ideology fifty years ago, but now we have perspective and can see free trade for what it really is, a scam. As John M. Culbertson, Economics Professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison wrote in September 1986

We have elevated the economic theory of free trade to the status of a national theology, and we follow its simple dictums as if they were immutable laws. We appear prepared to follow the precepts of free trade wherever they lead us, even if that means plunging lemminglike to our economic ruin. Today the evidence should be clear to anyone who wants to look at it: our blind allegiance to free trade threatens our national standard of living and our economic future. By sacrificing our home market on the altar of free trade, we are condemning ourselves and our children to a future of fewer competitive businesses, fewer good jobs, less opportunity, and a lower standard of living.[[3]](#footnote-3)

You don’t have to condemn yourself to this future. You can critically evaluate free trade. The cheerleaders of free trade often point to economic growth as free trade’s shining trophy. Leading us to...

## B. Destructive

This economic growth never goes to the people who spend their days sweating in factories to afford to buy their children a loaf of bread; it goes to people who have vacation houses in Malibu and mercedes’. According to Stephen Byers, the former UK and Trade Secretary in 2003 in his article entitled “I was wrong. Free market trade policies hurt the poor.”,

Even in those countries that have experienced overall economic growth as a result of trade liberalisation, poverty has not necessarily been reduced. In Mexico during the first half of the 1990s there was economic growth, yet the number of people living below the poverty line increased by 14 million in the 10 years from the mid-1980s. This was due to the fact that the benefits of a more open market all went to the large commercial operators, with the small concerns being squeezed out.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Free trade means that we open borders and allow more trade to come in from other countries. That means if China can make cheaper cars than Mexico, than no one will buy cars in Mexico. Chinese producers make more money, Mexican producers go broke. As all free trade advocates will tell you, it does make products cheaper. And I’m sure it’s a huge consolation to the family whose father lost their job that the cars he used to make are now $500 cheaper. There’s a better option as we’ll see in

# Contention 2 - Fair Trade Promotes General Welfare

If we truly want to help the impoverished, the best way to do it is also the most obvious. Don’t exploit them. Governments should institute rules that ensure their producers are paid a fair price. The most widely used mechanism of fair trade is placing a tax on incoming goods, a tariff, to ensure that larger countries with more resources aren’t destroying your industries. There are two reasons why this works.

## Allows Growth

For us here in the United States, it’s easy to talk about competition. For us, it just means that some manufacturers might get lower wages. But in dirt-poor countries, losing a trade competition means death. Jennifer Makoatsane is 34 and lives in a four-room house in South Africa with eight other family members, none of whom is currently employed. After South Africa instituted free trade reforms, her family lost their jobs. Now she says,

“When we wash dishes or clothes we keep that water to flush the toilet, or we adults will wash with the same water that the children wash in. It has also caused conflict within our household over what to prioritise in terms of spending. It is difficult to think about buying water. You think twice now whether to buy a loaf of bread or save it to buy water.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

These countries cannot grow in the same competitive arena where giants like the US prosper. But fair trade, paying producers a fair price, saves them. According to the UN Conference on Trade and Development in 2004,

But out of 108 countries for which data are available, only 10 out of 35 classified as having been “open” have high GDP growth, and only 7 out of 36 countries classified as restrictive have low GDP growth. There are 37 countries which have either high GDP growth with a “restrictive” trade regime or low GDP growth with an “open” trade regime.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The countries that restrict trade prosper. Why? Because they know that their people shouldn’t have to decide between bread and water. They know their needs. That leads us to the second reason why fair trade succeeds

## Creates Flexibility

If a government only follows the blind dictums of free trade, it will always repeat the exact same mistake over and over. And its people will starve, over and over. Fair trade allows countries to choose to pay their producers fairly. In most countries, their goal isn’t to prop up industry, it’s to stay out of a grave. Allowing people to live is truly the fairest accomplishment of all.

Opposing This Case

There are two methods to opposing this case.

1. Attack the value.

You could argue that regardless of economic benefit, we should neer advocate for fair trade because it imposes immoral restrictions on the free exchange of goods. A value of “Libertarianism”, “Natural rights”, “Property Rights”, or “Human Freedom” would work.

You’d defeat the value by showing how it’s vague and unreachable and swoop in with your moral standard that we should uphold. No impact the contentions and you’ll be good as gold.

1. Attack the contentions

There’s a substantial body of economic literature that says that free trade lifts developing countries out of poverty. Harness that! Show you ropponent that all the experts agree on the benefits of free trade.

But the key here is to do more than just quote stats. Explain the analysis. Show us why free trade benefits the poor in developing countries. That analysis will take you to the finish line.

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fair-trade> Merriam Webster, 2018, “Fair Trade Definition” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/free-trade> Merriam Webster, 2018, “Free Trade Definition [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John M. Culbertson, September 1986, Harvard Business Review, *“The Folly of Free Trade” John M. Culbertson is the professor of economics at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He has been an economist with the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System and a consultant to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. He is the author of six books, including International Trade and The Future of the West.* [*https://hbr.org/1986/09/the-folly-of-free-trade*](https://hbr.org/1986/09/the-folly-of-free-trade) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stephen Byers*, Former UK Trade and Industry Secretary,* May 2003, *“I was wrong. Free Market Trade Policies Hurt the Poor.”* [*https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/may/19/globalisation.politics*](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/may/19/globalisation.politics) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00010750:4455c9085e0b005a027d87d6703908ff.pdf> “Trade Invaders: The WTO & developing countries ‘right to protect’”, ActionAid International, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://unctad.org/en/Docs/ldc2004_en.pdf>, UN Conference on Trade and Development, “Least Developed Countries report” 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)