

The social representation of fair trade in a business student population

Luc K. Audebrand and Adrian Iacobus

The fair trade phenomenon is a social innovation that is getting more and more recognition in the Western societies ever since it has been introduced three decades ago. Its recent developments draw even more attention from consumers, profit and non-profit organizations, and governments. As many civil society organizations seek to change the rules applied to international, institutional and civic relationships, most alternative trade organizations also seek to change the rules applied to international trade and business relationships. They act as institutional entrepreneurs and active minorities in order to promote this alternative trade phenomenon and influence rule-makers. However, between alternative trade organizations and rule-makers, one must not forget the citizens living in a given community. Hence, in order to change the rules applied to international trade and business relationships, it might be necessary to have a primarily understanding of the representations people make about a phenomenon such as “fair trade,” since the links between the social representations and the social practices are well-established.

A social representation is the elaboration of a social object (e.g., fair trade) by a certain community (e.g., business students) in order to behave and communicate. Moscovici (1973) explained that social representations are “systems of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; secondly, to enable communication to take place amongst members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history” (p. xiii). The aim of the social representation theory is to show how this elaboration is getting done and how consensus, conflicts, and tensions in a community contribute to the elaboration process. The social representation theory studies how everyday interpersonal interactions and communicative dynamics result in the emergence of collectively shared patterns of beliefs, values, and practices. The theory does not imply that actors sharing common references hold the same positions but it stipulates that it is important to investigate the organization of differences in positioning. Indeed, social representations are not monolithic and widespread beliefs through a given population. On the contrary, a social representation can reflect as much the convergence or divergence inside a given community. According to Duveen (2001), “the theory of social representations provides the interpretative framework both for making representations visible and for rendering them intelligible as forms of social practices” (p. 15).

Our research objective is to evaluate the social representation of fair trade in a business student population with a free-association procedure. Business students are foreseen as future managers or entrepreneurs, as well as citizens and consumers. Their social representation of fair trade or any other alternative trade movement is crucial to understand the future of the many rules in business relationships. Moscovici (2001) argues that “the purpose of all representations is to make something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar.” (p. 37). This is done by anchoring and objectifying a given social object (e.g., fair trade). The *anchoring process* draws something foreign and disturbing into something that is classified and named, thus more familiar.

The *objectifying process* gives a sense of reality to images, turns abstractions into something tangible. Firstly, we are interested in understanding the systems of values, the ideas and the practices related to their social representation of fair trade. Secondly, we are interested in the way in which this community handles, distributes and represents its knowledge of fair trade. We will then be able to draw a representational field around the fair trade concept.

Our research results will be the first step in order to understand how a given community reacts to the values promoted by alternative trade organizations such as fair trade and by which mechanisms these values are distributed among individuals and groups. Our research results will also allow us to draw some theoretical and methodological implications regarding marketing and advertising issues vis-à-vis fair trade and other alternative trade activities.

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