

Wake and smell the revolution: It's time java lovers looked at the supply chain.

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Indifference is the easiest thing in the world. I know this, because I practise it every morning without even trying.

I sit in the quiet kitchen -- dog at my feet, paper spread across the table -- with a steaming mug of coffee at hand, its aroma part of the heady fragrance that has already filled the room with the scent of daybreak.

In other words, I take my morning coffee entirely for granted. I think nothing at all about its provenance, except perhaps for the most fleeting memory of its cost -- roughly \$4.50 for a 326-gram can of my favourite -- at the supermarket the previous Saturday.

In this offhand indifference, I'm fairly sure that I am not alone. For a long, long time, it has been easy to drink a guilt-free cup of coffee. Oh sure, we enjoy some Fair Trade variation when it makes itself available, but that's a bit of a hassle. In this nation of caffeine addicts (at 15 billion cups a year, Canadians consume considerably more coffee per capita than either Americans or Europeans), Fair Trade coffee still accounts for less than one per cent of sales.

Indifference might get a shaking-up this week, though, at least for coffee drinkers who decide to tune into TVO's documentary series *The View From Here*. Starting Wednesday at 10 p.m. (and continuing the following two Wednesdays at the same time), the province's public broadcaster is premiering a terrific new three-part documentary called *Black Coffee*.

Commissioned by TVO and directed by Montreal filmmaker Irene Angelico, it is a thoroughly engaging piece of work -- historically and culturally fascinating, emotionally involving, enlightening. Part 1, *The Irresistible Bean*, tells you more about coffee than you might have dreamed possible (all of it gorgeously filmed and with a sprightly tempo), from its Ethiopian origins to its cultural importance in, for example, the Venetian cafes that fostered operas by both Wagner and Verdi. The first part also lays solid historical groundwork, showing how the coffee trade came into existence, became global, enslaved millions as it enriched a handful, and morphed into what it is today -- the second most-traded legal commodity on the planet, after oil.

Part 3, *The Perfect Cup* (Nov. 30), deals with how the persuasive powers of global conscience are transforming the coffee industry, now that they've absorbed such startling realities as the money made by coffee growers -- a

penny for every \$2 cup of coffee sold.

But it's Part 2, *Gold in Your Cup* (Nov. 23), that really grabs hold and doesn't let go. That's the part that focuses on the age-old exploitation that created the trade and still powers it. With an emphasis on Latin America, *Gold in Your Cup* takes a searing look at how the coffee industry -- decimating the rainforest, keeping prices artificially low, employing slave labour in the past and its modern equivalent now -- has wreaked environmental and social havoc.

It is easy to be indifferent to a problem or global crisis if it exists only as an abstraction, as words. Start substituting human faces (and films do an excellent job of this), and the picture tells an entirely different story. An indictment of corporate greed and the evils of globalization becomes also a wrenching narrative about, say, a small coffee farmer from Mexico named Reymundo Barreda, who lost his life in the Arizona desert four years ago. Along with his soccer-playing 15-year-old son, Reymundo Jr., he was among the 14 desperate men -- mostly coffee farmers searching for a way to feed their families -- who died of exposure in the unforgiving heat along the "Devil's highway" while illegally trying to get into the United States. *Gold in Your Cup* shows the grieving widows, kids and parents at the other end of this not atypical journey.

I don't know who watches documentaries like *Black Coffee*, films that challenge consciences and call people to some variety of action. I don't know who goes out into the night to see them at festivals or special events, who rents them from wherever they're available, who tunes into them when they're aired on public television. I don't know, though I suspect it may be an audience of the mostly converted.

But there may be others, too, people who happen on them by chance as they flick idly across the channel universe or, unsuspecting, accompany a friend to an unfamiliar screening. There may be all sorts of possible converts out there for films like Irene Angelico's wonderful coffee trilogy, which is pretty hope-inspiring.

One pair of eyes, one pair of ears, one receptive heart at a time, a new collective awareness is born. This is how things change.

More people have started buying fairly traded coffee. More are buying beans, rather than ground, which not only is better for world consumption levels, but has the advantage of being purer. (Regulations allow up to 30 per cent impurities in ground coffee, which can include twigs and dirt.) Others are avoiding specialized coffee "drinks" which tend to use poorer quality beans like Robusta, instead of the better, costlier Arabica. Others have begun buying specialized coffee only, supporting the small farmers who supply the niche market, instead of the handful of multinationals that rule the global market. Some have even gone wild and brought home coffee roasters, purchasing their specialized coffee in unroasted green-bean form -- and getting a more flavourful beverage while supporting small growers more directly.

Maybe it's time for the rest of us to, uh, wake up and smell the coffee.

Tomorrow, as we clear our morning heads with the full aroma of Brazil's -- or Bolivia's or Burundi's -- best roasted beans, letting their dark liquor jolt our senses and set us up for the day, maybe we can think of the people at the other end of the supply chain.

Perhaps we can even hold that thought for a bit. Roll it around in our heads as the mug steams in front of us. Picture faces -- of Reymundo Barreda, father and son, or of a million other people who have, one way or another, contributed directly and at great personal cost to our current casual moment of rich pleasure.

Then, with a small nudge from our consciences, we might start planning for another cup of coffee with a slightly different provenance. One appreciative sip at a time, we might even feel the indifference starting to evaporate around us.

This is how all the best revolutions happen.