



## Fair-trade efforts reshaping global economy

by Douglas Murray

Some years back on a return flight from Latin America where I'd been conducting research on fair-trade coffee, I discovered the passenger next to me was a coffee buyer for a major European company. I asked him, "What do you think of fair-trade coffee?" His gruff response was, "I hate it!" Taken aback, I asked why.

The coffee buyer then vented his frustration over how he, his company, the plantations from whom they buy, and the retailers to whom they sell were increasingly having to explain themselves

to the press, government agencies, or consumers. He cited recurring questions: What are the conditions under which you produce your coffee and purchase it? Do workers go hungry? Are rainforests being cut?

"Fair trade raises questions about whether we're something other than fair," he said and pointedly ended the conversation. I was left to think about his complaint on the long flight home.

I decided that, however unpleasant this turn of events was for the coffee buyer and his colleagues, in the grand scheme of things, it represented a significant and positive change in the way we produce, trade, and consume on a global scale. That large-scale farmers are finding it necessary to defend the way they treat their workers, that corporations need to explain the terms under which they buy and sell, or that consumers are making decisions in the supermarket aimed at improving the health, well-being, and environment of people and places around the world all are important features of the 21st-century global economy.

From the now decades-old organics movement to the more recent fair-trade movement to the newly emerging "Be Local" movement, the global economy is

being called to task by consumers, community organizations, entrepreneurs, and governments for its negative social and ecological effects through what has come to be known as market-based social change.

This is the focus of the recently created Center for Fair and Alternative Trade Studies at Colorado State. Over the past decade, an international team of researchers and practitioners working through the Center has investigated this emerging phenomenon, producing a wide range of scholarly articles and policy reports on fair trade, alternative trade, the organics industry, Be Local food in the Fort Collins area, and more. A newly released book, *Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization* (Routledge Press, 2007), edited by Center co-directors Laura Reynolds and myself (along with John Wilkinson), already is in its second printing – after only a few months in print – due to international demand.

"This book, which draws insights from across North America, Europe, Latin America, and Africa, helps us understand fair trade as a global movement," Reynolds says. "What accounts for the book's success is the academic rigor it applies in analyzing not only fair trade's significant promise, but also the real

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La Casa del Cafe coffee plantation outside Alajuela, Costa Rica.

John Eisele



John Eisele

Sociology Professor Doug Murray, co-director of the Center for Fair and Alternative Trade Studies, catches some down time at Ten Thousand Villages, a Fort Collins store that specializes in fair-trade goods. Lower right: The Center's co-director, Laura Reynolds, with Norman Santamaria Brenes, member of a fair trade coffee co-operative in Monteverde, Costa Rica. Brenes inherited the matate, used to grind coffee beans, from his parents.

challenges it faces. Part of the book's appeal comes from the recognition by policy makers, entrepreneurs, activists, students, and the general public that the Center is the only group working on these issues from an un-self-interested perspective."

Center researchers have been awarded grants from the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Bohemian Foundation, and others. The Center also provides training for graduate students (including a fully funded research assistantship) and outreach in the form of technical support for local and international alternative trade efforts.

This spring, the Center is launching an Endowment Initiative to ensure the Center's sustainability in the years ahead.

Once funded, the Endowment will allow the Center to conduct regular local and international workshops on emerging issues related to market-based social change. It will provide scholarships for graduate students and support to the Center's ongoing research and outreach efforts.

One of the first contributors to the Center's Endowment was Tiffany Tompkins, a 1999 CSU graduate and CEO of Etica, a Minneapolis-based, fair-trade import business. In explaining her support for the endowment, Tompkins says: "Our business depends on well-informed consumers who make purchases based on a desire to create a more sustainable and socially just world. The Center is a unique source of unbiased and in-depth analysis for conscious

consumers as well as socially aware entrepreneurs, public policy makers, and nongovernmental organization leaders seeking to improve conditions in the 21st-century economy. CSU can be proud of this endeavor."

However frustrating it may be for some people to be questioned on what they see as business-as-usual, more people are scrutinizing the effects of the way we produce, trade, and consume. Momentum clearly is building toward reshaping the global economy in ways that foster better living conditions and a more sustainable environment.

Through the Center, CSU's contribution to our understanding of 21st-century, market-based social change is likely to have significant impacts on our ability to shape these processes in ways that meet the needs of both current and future generations. ♦

