

ANTI-POLITICS MOVEMENT:

The Individualization of Change in Fair Trade Discourse

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Glossary	4
Chapter 1. Introduction	5
Inside a Fair Trade Organization	5
The Fair Trade Premise	7
Chapter 2. Methodology	12
Chapter 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	16
"Studying Up" Fair Trade	16
Certified vs. FTO	19
Understanding Fair Trade as a System	22
<i>Fair Trade as a Development Tool</i>	22
<i>Literature on Development</i>	28
<i>Fair Trade as a Social Movement</i>	29
Fair Trade Northerners as Political Subjects	31
Up from Where? The Anthropologist's Position and Studying Across	34
Chapter 4. Assumptions of Injustice in Fair Trade Discourse	41
Global Needs and the Need to Make a Difference	41
Transformative Power of Fair Trade	44
Seeing as a Way of Knowing Poverty	46
Conclusion	49
Chapter 5. The Individualized Response to Inequality	51
Fair Trade Wants You!	52
Origin Stories	53
The Power of One: Fair Trade Superstars	55
Participation in Economic Justice	57
The Little Things	57
Conclusion	59
Chapter 6. Depoliticized Constructions of Southern Producers	62
Here's the Story	62
Artisans' Stories at MayaWorks	65
Conclusion	67
Chapter 7. Consequences and Conclusions	69
Conditioning Different Possibilities	73
The Global Sea of Inequality	75
Works Cited	77

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Glossary

FLO: Fair Trade Labelling Organizations International

FTF: Fair Trade Federation

FTO/ATO: Fair Trade Organization/Alternative Trade Organization

WFTO: World Fair Trade Organization (formerly IFAT, International Fair Trade Association)

Jeannie Balanda: MayaWorks executive director

Naomi Czerwinskyj: MayaWorks customer service associate

Sarah Cunningham: MayaWorks product manager

SERRV: Sales Exchange for Refugee Rehabilitation and Vocation

Ten Thousand Villages: One of the oldest and largest Fair Trade Organizations in North America; part of the Mennonite Central Committee

TransFair USA: Third-party certifier of fair trade products in the United States; a member of FLO

Chapter 1. Introduction

Is fair trade a social movement that speaks to neo-liberal political subjectivities, or does it operate more like economic development? Fisher's (2007) framework of "articulating modes of social transformation" allows both interpretations to be relevant. In this capstone I use interviews, participant observation at a Chicago fair trade organization, and discourse analysis of fair trade materials to study the side of fair trade partnerships that exercise more economic power.

Participation in fair trade offers Northerners a way to reconcile their recognition of possessing disproportionate wealth in the global economic system with their uncertainty of how to create structural change in that system. Because fair trade calls on Northern consumers to make change at the individual level, the identities of Southern producers at the "underdeveloped" end of trade relationships are constructed in depoliticized, acontextual ways, thus limiting the possibilities for conceptualizing more radical transformation of poverty in the Global South.

Inside a Fair Trade Organization

A Chicago newcomer walking to the MayaWorks office will easily be reminded of the city's industrial history. The low brick buildings in this business's neighborhood cover at least half of each block and are separated by wide streets with limited traffic. On a clear day, when the wind is not assaulting, the contrast of silver and gray skyscrapers stands out against the skyline to the east. Inside the building where the fair trade organization operates, the office landscape is equally calm and open. With rafters from the ceiling above, a brick wall on one side, and a six-foot window at the back, the space is reminiscent of a warehouse but feels neither empty nor old. In one of the front quarters of the long rectangular office, metal shelves are lined with plastic tubs of hand-crafted products from Guatemala. If a bimonthly shipment of products has recently arrived, sturdy white packages the size of full trash bags are likely sitting near the front doors. To

the right of the metal shelves are a kitchenette area and two work tables, upon which brightly colored placemats, scarves, kippot, and coin purses are often piled before being packaged to send to customers or volunteers. A small computer area and an extra stock room occupy the back half of the office.

Only three women work in this office on a nine-to-five, Monday-Friday basis, yet the web of connections they weave through their daily work reaches both coasts of the U.S. and extends to seven communities in Guatemala. According to one of the organization's brochures, "MayaWorks is a collaboration of women from Guatemala and North America whose mission is to empower Mayan women to end their cycle of poverty and improve their lives." The way that the women seek to accomplish that mission is by finding U.S. and Canadian markets for Mayan women's handcrafted items. The Chicago office is the distribution center for those handicrafts, as well as the site of coordination for all of the volunteer work involved in carrying out the mission. At an office in the department of Chimaltenango, Guatemala, a staff of three indigenous women and one man orchestrate business within that country and among the organization's nine artisan groups.

In addition to seven staff members and about 225 partner artisans, the MayaWorks network includes 160 volunteers nationwide and an array of customers who make purchases in three ways: wholesale, online retail, and at volunteer sales. The primary role of volunteers is to host sales at their homes, churches, schools, or community events. Sixty percent of sales take place in this way. MayaWorks incorporated as a non-profit business in 1996 with the slogan of "*Interweaving lives, discovering one world.*" Current and former staff members have described the purpose of the organization as twofold: firstly, MayaWorks operates to improve the economic security of Mayan women and their families. Secondly, the organization offers a way

for women¹ in the U.S. to participate in economic justice projects. These two purposes intertwine via MayaWorks' volunteer sales format.

Secondary to connecting a network of women in an effort to open new markets for Mayan artisans, MayaWorks operates two other projects in Guatemala: a micro-credit program to provide income-generating loans to the artisans as well as an education program comprised of literacy and leadership trainings for women artisans, scholarships for daughters of group members, and tutoring centers in the community. According to Sarah Cunningham, the product manager at the Chicago office, these projects enhance the mission of providing work to artisans such that "they're getting a lot more benefits out of their involvement with MayaWorks." At the time that I conducted fieldwork at the U.S. headquarters, MayaWorks was in the process of separating these secondary projects into a spin-off non-profit organization. The reason for this change, the executive director told me, was that when MayaWorks originally formed in the 1990s, incorporating as a non-profit in Guatemala was very difficult, so the Guatemala office was set up as a for-profit business. By restructuring, MayaWorks-Guatemala will eliminate taxes on donations received for the micro-credit and education programs, and the overall tax burden of the for-profit section will also be lessened by not having the associated donations as part of the yearly income.

The Fair Trade Premise

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency, and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers—especially in the South. Fair trade organizations (backed by consumers) are actively engaged in supporting producers in awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practices of conventional international trade. –F.I.N.E.² [DeCarlo 2007]

¹ "And men" usually comes as an afterthought in this statement.

² F.I.N.E. stands for Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO), International Fair Trade Association (now the World Fair Trade Organization), Network of European Worldshops (NEWS!), and European Fair Trade Association (EFTA).

MayaWorks is a member of the Fair Trade Federation, which describes itself on its website as “the trade association that strengthens and promotes North American organizations fully committed to fair trade. The Federation is part of the global fair trade movement, building equitable and sustainable trading partnerships and creating opportunities to alleviate poverty.” Alternative trade organizations (ATOs—now called fair trade organizations, or FTOs) began in the 1940s as religiously-affiliated businesses that marketed worldwide artisans’ products directly through congregations. Two of these groups, SERRV (Sales Exchange for Refugee Rehabilitation and Vocation) International and Ten Thousand Villages, today comprise the largest and oldest fair trade businesses in North America. In the second half of the twentieth century, as goods were consumed for ever-changing wants, art and craft traditions were incorporated into the world market. ATOs first proliferated in Europe in the 1960s and were followed by small shops and mail-order catalogues in North America (Grimes 2000:12-17). In the 1980s, large and small fair traders formed networks, and fair trade certification and labeling for commodities emerged. In 1994, North American ATOs formalized their association as the Fair Trade Federation (FTF). The FTF lists nine principles for its member organizations:

- 1) Create Opportunities for Economically and Socially Marginalized Producers*
- 2) Develop Transparent and Accountable Relationships*
- 3) Build Capacity*
- 4) Promote Fair Trade*
- 5) Pay Promptly and Fairly*
- 6) Support Safe and Empowering Working Conditions*
- 7) Ensure the Rights of Children*
- 8) Cultivate Environmental Stewardship*
- 9) Respect Cultural Identity*

Of these principles MayaWorks staff members most often discussed creating opportunities for producers and building relationships with those producers as their goals in fair trade. More than

transparency and accountability, each of the staff members emphasized that these relationships were ones that were developed over time:

One of the fair trade principles is that you are developing an intimate relationship with your artisans or your producers, so that you really know who you're working with. And you develop a long-term relationship with them. That is the primary principle of fair trade—one that I think is harder to implement, for some organizations. Not, not for MayaWorks. MayaWorks knows exactly who all of their artisans are. We've been working with the same artisans for, you know, ten years, um, and that's a really important piece of the work that we do is that we have this long-term, ongoing intimate relationship with our artisans. [Jeannie Balanda, MayaWorks executive director, interview with author]

According to the staff members, the intimacy of their trading relationships with the Guatemalan women allows the Mayan artisans to have a say in their work and enables the organization to respond appropriately to their needs. For example, Jeannie told me about one artisan group with which they have to be especially transparent. During the political violence of the 1980s and early 1990s in Guatemala, a massacre occurred in that community, so the people there are still highly cautious, and some of the women artisans dislike signing their names to verify that they made products and received payments for them.

That example indicates that although the FTF principles seem straightforward, the ways that they are accomplished among fair trade organizations are not as obvious. Naomi Czerwinskyj, the MayaWorks customer service associate, explained that the meaning of fair trade is complicated and sometimes used as a marketing buzz word: “I just hope that through MayaWorks what we do—I hope that we’re really trying to keep the integrity of what that really means. That it’s not just, you know, the next trend.”

According to the Fair Trade Federation’s “Report on Trends in the North American Fair Trade Market,” in 2007, fair trade organizations saw an average of \$517,384 in sales. In a survey of U.S. consumers, 71.4 percent had heard of “fair trade” and 88 percent of those people considered themselves conscious consumers. Going beyond trends in numbers, this paper will

explore why some Northerners participate in the fair trade system and how the fair trade discourse constructs their involvement. It is an attempt to understand what this means about the political subjectivities of such Northerners and how fair trade fits into the broader global economic system.

After describing my methods and reviewing the literature on fair trade in chapters two and three, I begin my analysis by exploring the fair trade system's basic assumption that economic injustice exists in the Global South. This assumption gets articulated in the discourse through the idea of "making a difference" and the transformative power of fair trade connections for farmers and artisans. Many women involved with MayaWorks have seen poverty during experiences outside the United States. Sympathizing with the plight of the poor, they participate in the fair trade system as a way to decrease global economic inequality.

The particular mode of accomplishing that task takes focus in chapter five. In the context of a consumer-based social movement, fair trade discourse points out to Northerners that they are involved in global trade, which has a direct impact on the lives of impoverished producers of the South. Hence, the appropriate response to economic inequality becomes a change in purchasing patterns. The discourse of fair trade creates a neo-liberal approach to remedying injustice in the sense that power and responsibility to create change is located with the individual, and the solutions for poverty are found in the marketplace. Stories of fair trade superstars from the Global North and the rhetoric of "voting with your dollar" convey to participants the reproducible premise that each individual can "make a difference" in the poverty of Southern producers.

In chapter six I examine the discursive construction of fair trade producers, which often describe farmers and artisans in terms of one-dimensional demographics related to marginality.

Store displays and product descriptions on websites tend to include cultural details about crafts production, while ignoring the political and historical contexts of the producers' poverty. In chapter seven, I use Bourdieu's conception of "misrecognition" to analyze how this depoliticization of poverty, as a result of the system's neo-liberal location of power, precludes thinking about more systemic transformation of global trade. I conclude with suggestions for ways that the MayaWorks organization in particular might be able to create broader conditions of possibility for altering economic inequality.

Chapter 2. Methodology

I conducted participant observation for one week at the MayaWorks distribution center in Chicago in March 2009. In accordance with the staff members' request, I arrived at the office between ten and eleven a.m. each day. I spent my time in the office viewing and listening to the process of their work, asking questions, and fulfilling various tasks for the organization. The staff members also granted me access to two three-inch binders stuffed with archival promotional materials and press clippings, which they allowed me to photocopy as well. On my first day there, Sarah Cunningham, the product manager, initiated my research with a tour of the office. On the second day, I attended a Chicago Fair Trade meeting with Naomi Czerwinskyj, the customer service associate. The meeting took place in a "conference room" of GreenHeart, a fair trade retail store in downtown Chicago, and after leaving MayaWorks on a different day I visited another fair trade retail store called Maya Essence, located farther north in the city. During my fieldwork, I completed minor volunteer projects for the organization as both a way to contribute and a way to learn more about their work. I also met and held conversations with two regular MayaWorks volunteers. One of those volunteers was a woman who in 2008 raised more money through sales and donations than any other MayaWorks volunteer. The other volunteer that I met was a local college student who worked in the office once a week and had also coordinated two sales. Jeannie Balanda, the executive director of MayaWorks also connected me to the retired founder of MayaWorks, who I interviewed by phone after my trip.

I primarily gathered information through informal interviews conducted at or in relation to the MayaWorks office. Sometimes I asked questions as I worked on volunteer projects at the extra PC next to the staff computers. I often worked at a table between the computer area and the partial kitchen—a spot from which I initiated discussions when the women grabbed snacks from

the fridge or heated water for tea. I also learned about the staff members and volunteers through ambulatory conversations on the way to the train or while tagging along on lunch trips to nearby cafés and taquerías.

The short time frame of my participant-observation constitutes the most significant limitation to my research. Since I completed this capstone during a one-semester independent study, and because my case study took place hundreds of miles from my own residence, I conducted the participant observation during the only available travel time of the semester: spring break. In the week that I spent at MayaWorks, the staff members were open and friendly toward me and my questions. Although the business-as-usual atmosphere and the fact that I was not researching politically or personally sensitive topics made it appear that my presence did not significantly alter their behavior and conversations during my time in the office, a lengthier research period would have allowed the staff and myself to establish deeper relationships. With more time to develop relationships, I would have been able to better understand how people involved with MayaWorks comprehend their roles in the global economy, as well as how they conceptualize producers of the South. I also would have felt more comfortable asking questions, whereas, with the familiarity of only a week, I did not want to constantly interrupt any individual's work or make any them feel overwhelmed by my presence.

In addition to providing the opportunity to ask deeper and more numerous questions, a longer research trip would have enabled me to learn about important aspects of this fair trade business simply through exposure. The idea that “you don't know how much you don't know” is as relevant to the initial stages of ethnography as it is to any new experience. MayaWorks staff members told me that the months after Christmas through summer is their “downtime”—the season when they focus on research and generating new ideas. By contrast, September through

December is their busiest time of year, during which Sarah said that they spend the majority of their time packing and shipping boxes of products for volunteer sales. Being at the office during that time period would undoubtedly create a more comprehensive view of the work that these women do and the ways that they engage with Mayan artisans through their work.

Perhaps the most important way that a lengthier research period would have enhanced this project is the broader network that I could have built among people involved with MayaWorks. The three-woman staff that I got to know is central to the operation of the business, however, the 100-woman volunteer base is crucial to the sales function. According to Sarah, sixty percent of MayaWorks' business is done through volunteer sales. My vision for a more complete case study of MayaWorks includes interviewing a large number of the volunteers, as well attending the sales that they hold. The latter activity in particular would allow me to observe another way in which the Mayan artisans' stories are constructed for consumers. Although I did not experience the verbal aspect of the artisans' stories, I base much of my analysis on the informational materials—flyers, pamphlets, a DVD, and pages on the website—that MayaWorks makes available to consumers.

To mitigate the expected brevity of my participant-observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the MayaWorks staff members via phone in advance of my Chicago fieldwork. The background knowledge about the views and lives of the staff members that I gained from my initial interviews gave me a learning curve for what questions to ask and how to ask them when I arrived to do what ethnography, which anthropologist Jean Jackson characterizes as “very much just-plunge-into-it research” (interview with author). Additionally, through my review of both academic and popular literature on fair trade, I had established a base of knowledge of fair trade processes, participants, and issues that was also important to my

ability to understand the basic workings of organization quickly and to learn as much as possible about my research questions in a short time frame. In the section that follows I will discuss further how the literature review shaped those research questions.

Chapter 3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

My selection of a fair trade case study within the United States was partly a practical choice based on obstacles of time, finances, access, and language; however, my interest in the project can also be traced to my own experience of exposure to fair trade products early in college. As a freshman researching weaving traditions across cultures, I encountered information about Guatemalan women weaving in cooperatives and selling their products in the U.S. to earn income—a process called “fair trade.” The following semester I joined a student club that focused on issues in U.S. trade policy. By observing a difference between policy-based and consumer-based efforts to change trade practices, my curiosity grew with regard to how movements understand international trade issues and what ways Northerners engage with their positions in the global trade system. Once I began this project as a senior, my reading of scholarly writing on fair trade affirmed my interest in focusing on the Northern side of fair trade, as there is a gap in research by anthropologists on this front.

“Studying Up” Fair Trade

In the long tradition of doing ethnographic fieldwork in “other” places, social scientists interested in fair trade have published various studies based on fieldwork among the producers of fair trade crafts and commodities. Although not all of the researchers are situated among explicitly “fair trade” producers, Grimes and Milgram’s (2000) edited volume on “alternative trade” in crafts production raises concerns about the preservation of cultural values during interactions in the global economy through studies among producer groups from Nepal to Mexico. More recently, several researchers have attempted to assess fair trade’s benefits and limitations. In a study of fair trade groups in the Windwards Islands banana industry, Mark Moberg (2005) concludes with ambivalence, noting that access to fair trade markets provide

material benefits to farmers, but the personal and reciprocal relationships emphasized by fair trade discourse have yet to be established. For instance, although the Windward Islands Farmers Association establishes quarterly production quotas for each of the islands, when Tesco³ began marketing fair trade fruit, the company insisted on sourcing bananas specifically from Dominica⁴. As a result, fair trade producer groups expanded rapidly there but less quickly on the other islands. According to Moberg, “Many Fair Trade banana producers perceive aspects of the marketing networks and attendant obligations in which they are now involved as little different from the economic dependence that they experienced in the past” (2005:5). The gap between producer and retail prices presents another point example of how Moberg says the rhetoric of more equitable relationships falls short in the Windwards banana industry: while farmers receive a 41 percent higher payment for fair trade fruit than generic fruit, the U.K. grocery stores to which they sell receive a price 119 percent higher from consumers.

Sarah Lyon (2007) found similar pros and cons in the experiences of members of a Mayan Guatemalan coffee cooperative, and thus also concludes with an ambivalent evaluation of the fair trade system. Specifically, Lyon identifies the potential benefits to producers as higher prices, stable market access, organizational capacity building, market information, and access credit. The limitations she points out include increasing debt burdens, insufficient compensation, the potential for growing inequality, and a lack of participation in international decision making and agenda setting for the fair trade system.

While Moberg and Lyon offer important contributions to the academic literature on fair trade, farms and cooperatives cannot be the only locations for research on this topic. I met with the expectation to conduct fair trade research at the site of production more than once in the

³ A U.K. grocery store

⁴ Some industry officials claimed that Tesco’s decision would enhance its reputation for environmental responsibility, since Dominica has been recognized internationally for its conservation policies (Moberg 2005:10).

course of my research. When I contacted MayaWorks, requesting to do my fieldwork at their office, they welcomed the idea but made sure to clarify that there are no artisans in Chicago. After I responded that I knew this but was more interested in how fair trade operates in the United States, they continued to welcome me, but expressed concern that I might find the experience of observing their daily work rather boring⁵. Additionally, many other people with whom I discussed my project assumed that my primary concern would be with the producers of the fair trade system. These assumptions and suggestions came from friends, peers, and at least one professor.

In her seminal essay, “Up the Anthropologist—Perspectives Gained from Studying Up,” Laura Nader forty years ago pointed out the abundance of anthropological literature on disadvantaged and minority groups in contrast to the dearth of research on the middle and upper classes, on the colonizers (rather than the colonized), and cultures of power and affluence (rather than poverty). Deeming the latter type of work to be equally necessary, she issued a call for “studying up”:

Anthropologists have a great deal to contribute to our understanding of the processes whereby power and responsibility are exercised in the United States...the quality of life and our lives themselves may depend upon the extent to which citizens understand those who shape attitudes and actually control institutional structures. [284]

In as much as the fair trade system operates to promote economic development⁶, my decision to study the U.S. end of the fair trade commodity chain responds to Nader’s call. She argues at length about the democratic relevance of studying the powerful members within U.S. society. She also notes the relevance of this focus for global populations:

It is appropriate that a reinvented anthropology should study powerful institutions and bureaucratic organizations in the United States, for such institutions and their network

⁵ This concern was part of the impetus for giving me volunteer assignments during my time at the office.

⁶ See below for discussion.

systems affect our lives and also affect the lives of people that anthropologists have traditionally studied all around the world. [292/3]

Indeed, it is logical for literature on a system purporting to create partnerships between people in the Global North and South to include research on both sides of the partnerships; however, Nader's argument demands this inclusion, because the intended partnerships operate within a context of power disparity between two groups. In this study, I seek to understand why some Northerners find fair trade to be a compelling way to address issues of poverty in the Global South. Although their reasons for involvement may seem to have a lesser effect on the lives of producers than fair trade project's organizational planning—a process which happens primarily in the North and needs research attention as well—my hope is that the findings will illuminate the ideologies that shape fair trade operations in the North and thereby affect its Southern participants.

Certified vs. FTO

The literature on fair trade can of course be categorized in ways other than producer-focused and consumer-focused research. Writing about fair trade in South Asia, Sarah Besky points out that research on Latin America is most prevalent among production studies (2008:3). In addition to geography, the actual item being traded creates themes among fair trade research. A hand-woven table runner from Guatemala is an entirely different product from a banana cultivated in the Caribbean. The producers, marketers, distributors, and consumers of these items thus act and interact differently within the fair trade system, which actually includes two distinct manifestations (see Box 1). The first manifestation is a network of fair trade organizations (FTOs) that create direct links with producer groups and negotiate the “fairness” of their trading relationships on an individual basis. These organizations, formerly called alternative trade organizations, proliferated through the format of “World Shops” in the 1960s and 70s (Raynolds

and Long 2007:16). Small shops and mail-order catalogues in North America multiplied after that, and in the 1980s, large and small fair traders formed networks. In 1992, North American ATOs formalized their association as the Fair Trade Federation (Grimes 2000:12-13). As mentioned earlier, MayaWorks is a member of the Fair Trade Federation.

The other major manifestation in the fair trade system is product certification and labeling. Third party certification systems emerged in the 1980s, expanding the fair trade product range beyond handicrafts to major food commodities such as coffee, tea, and sugar and establishing a new dominant element of the movement. Through this development, businesses other than FTOs were able to incorporate “fair trade” products and lines into their inventories, thus allowing for a significant expansion of fair trade distribution but also shifting the focus away from producer-consumer connections and toward regulatory guarantees about prices, producer group structure, and production processes (Raynolds and Long 2007:17). European fair trade labeling initiatives formed an umbrella group called Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) in 1997 (Raynolds and Murray 2007:8). Sales of certified commodities are concentrated in Europe (Raynolds and Long 2007:17), but Transfair USA began certifying fair trade coffee in the United States in 1999 and now also certifies teas, cocoa, fresh fruit, honey, sugar, flowers and wine, according to the organization’s website.

Box 1. Two Models within the Fair Trade System

ATOs/FTOs	Certification and Labeling
Focus on new channels of exchange	Focus on independent third-party certification
Typically direct involvement in importing and retailing by the Northern organization	Import and sales handled by mainstream commercial groups
Effective in smaller networks with face-to-face information exchange	Traders licensed by FLO must pay for fair trade label and meet formal standards
Members of networks such as FTF and WFTO agree to follow certain fair trade principles	Producer standards of FLO require democratic sharing of benefits; producers now must also pay fee for certification
Challenges: broadening the consumer base beyond niche markets	Challenges: Lack of flexibility due to standardization; FLO increasingly bureaucratic and industrial

Coffee was the first product to be fair trade certified; hence, it is the most valuable fair trade product (Raynolds and Long 2007:23). Coffee is also a common focus for academic publications about fair trade, whether they focus on the producer or the consumer⁷. More generally, though, the certification wing of the fair trade system has received more attention from scholars than the smaller FTOs, which typically deal with crafts production. The edited volume *Fair Trade: the Challenges of Transforming Globalization* (2007), for example, is comprised of studies of the certification branch and also currently the most extensive source of primary research on fair trade. A key issue that emerges from this volume is the whether the ideals of fair trade of have been forgotten in pursuit of commercial success and growth (Murray and Raynolds 2007b). Certification enabled the mainstreaming of fair trade commodities to large corporate traders and retailers but also put the principles of the system up for debate, as these distributors constitute “unlikely partners.” Apart from questioning the moral or ethical standards, FTOs raise concern that larger certified enterprises can under-price them. As Moberg points out, “Ultimately, the movement is based on a paradox in its attempt to marshal the forces of the market against the market’s own logic of global price competition” (2005:5).

Because crafts are unique to a location and also to individual artisans, the standardization for pricing and production practices established through certification is not as practical in this sector. The degree of standardization for “fairness” possible in crops like coffee and cocoa beans means that the certification wing is able to grow more rapidly. The great proliferation of labeled products⁸ and their rapid growth in sales volumes⁹ may account for the heavier focus on studying the certification branch of the system. The questions about benefits and limitations that several

⁷ See Cycon 2001, Grodnik and Conroy 2007, Jaffee 2007, Lyon 2007 and 2008, Reichman 2008, Renard and Pérez-Grovas 2007, Smith 2007

⁸ FLO had certified 18 items by 2004 (Raynolds and Long 2007:24)

⁹ 483 percent between 1998 and 2005 (Raynolds and Long 2007:21)

studies address may also be easier to answer with more defined standards to use as measurement instruments; however, the lack of uniform standards for what makes trade fair among FTOs means that their practices should be studied as well. Moreover, the fact that FTOs typically work with products that consumers are not necessarily “already buying anyway,” (handicrafts as opposed to coffee or bananas) makes Northerners’ motivations for participating in the fair trade system all the more compelling. The Grimes and Milgram (2000) volume stands alone as a book looking specifically at crafts production within the realm of alternative trade, but as previously mentioned, not all of the authors studied specifically fair trade groups. MayaWorks is a fair trade organization and a member of the Fair Trade Federation. This paper, therefore, addresses a part of the larger fair trade system that is included in the broader discourse, yet has not been placed as such by anthropological studies.

Understanding Fair Trade as a System

Fair Trade as a Development Tool

Two years after my initial observation of differences between policy-based and consumer-based engagement with international trade, my concern with the involvement of Northerners in fair trade was fueled forward by a class on the anthropology of development. In that course, I encountered Gustavo Esteva’s (1992) critical ideas on the invention of underdevelopment. Esteva writes that development discourse established the concept of “underdevelopment” as a homogenizing lens through which we understand the identities of two thirds of the world’s population. His argument struck me with the notion that fair trade organizations, too, are constructing people of the Global South in particular ways. The discourse of “fair trade” predominantly articulates itself as a social justice movement; however, the actual workings of this “movement” make a framework of international economic development equally,

if not more, appropriate to the study of fair trade organizations. Furthermore, I hypothesize that the growth of fair trade and its conceptualizations of economic justice have historically been influenced by development discourse in ways that have not yet been investigated.

The *Fair Trade Futures* action guide reports, “in the post World War II era, Fair Trade has been seen as an international development tool and a more dignified and sustainable alternative to aid,” (2005:4) but the historical relationship of fair trade and development has not yet been explored in academic research. The alternative trade model grew over a timeline similar to that of “development” as an ideology, a practice, and an industry. The origins of the latter are cited as part of Harry Truman’s vision of the post-WWII world, while the beginnings of fair trade are traced to the same decade in practices associated with Northern religious organizations working in Southern countries. The question of how much influence the concepts of development and underdevelopment played in the subsequent growth of fair trade—which took place primarily from the 1970s through 1990s—demands further historical examination in light of the fact that the Fair Trade Federation today calls fair trade “a strategy for poverty alleviation and sustainable development.”

Although some large corporations like Starbucks can carry fair trade *product lines* through third-party certification, organizations that work exclusively in fair trade emphasize the long-term sustainability of their trade relationships with farmers and artisans. This non-certification model of fair trade thus often puts an emphasis on community development. For instance, while MayaWorks staff members articulated the organization’s primary mission as “providing work for artisans”, they also described the nature of their trade relationships as one of the most important principles of fair trade. Product manager Sarah Cunningham informed me

more than once that capacity-building and trainings were the most exciting aspect of their work to her:

Whether it's the literacy training that we've funded, or working on new weaving techniques with the group and getting them new parts to their looms, so that they can make new products that they hadn't been able to make before, that not only helps us as an organization but they're able to then go and sell that—in the market, if they want to...and find other markets outside of MayaWorks.

To underscore the value she sees in this aspect of MayaWorks activities, Sarah related the story of one artisan group that was originally only willing to make table runners, not any products that required sewing. The MayaWorks staff was okay with their preference, but since table runners are not a product that moves quickly, the group could only receive limited orders. Eventually, Sarah said, the artisan group “came together” and decided they wanted to learn to sew.

MayaWorks then donated sewing equipment and conducted workshops to teach the women, and now the group makes shoe bags and pouches in addition to table runners. Importantly for Sarah, though, the artisans can also apply the skills they learned to other venues. That emphasis echoes the prominence of capacity-building and training in current development discourse.

MayaWorks staff members thus position their fair trade work as a development tool. The organization's current brochure states, “We believe that community development happens through the economic development of women.” Having been a PeaceCorps volunteer in Guatemala, Jeannie Balandá explained her reasoning for joining the organization in June 2008 as a desire “to get much more back involved in international development.” She affirmed that MayaWorks' fair trade activities are a form of development and noted, “We're trying to develop the communities of our weavers.”

The community development model allows fair trade discourse to disassociate from the notion of charity—a distinction common to development ideology as well. Despite the rejection

of the profit-oriented values of today's global market system, the entrenched importance of the spirit of labor is encapsulated by the slogan of "trade not aid" in fair trade promotional materials and among fair trade practitioners. Jeannie Balanda, for example, emphasized that fair trade involves an exchange: "It's not a hand-out. Artisans are being paid for their work." I heard the same rejection of the notion of hand-outs in a conversation with a leader of the fair trade club at American University. She characterized fair trade instead as a "hand *up*." Matthias Zick Varul interprets this attitude among fair traders as a desire to move away from the paternalistic implications of charity. He notes, however: "that receiving money in market exchanges is more dignified than receiving gifts is so self-evident that nobody seems to wonder why" (2008:658). Varul further suggests that the distinction implied by "trade not aid" is merely a reinvention of the old charity discourse of the deserving poor, "who have a right to a decent standard of living as they may not be productive to market requirements, but at least they do all they can and also limit their spending to virtuous, i.e. labour-power reproducing, purposes" (2008:667). In positing worldly labor as a validating activity essential to improving communities, fair trade organizations thus align more with a paradigm of economic development than a movement making particular political, economic, and social demands.

Carolyn Fisher (2007) looks at three different theoretical interpretations of fair trade: as de-fetishization/gifting, as re-commodification, and as a social movement.¹⁰ After evaluating each of these approaches, she adds, "Left out of this review is the perspective of producers, from whose point of view fair trade seems to often closely resemble other economic development initiatives" (2007:84). This point is worth noting firstly for the framework it can offer to understanding fair trade. Secondly, the absence of producers' perspective in ways of categorizing fair trade highlights a problematic similarity between fair trade and development: the tendency

¹⁰ See below for further discussion.

for debates over definitions and values, as well as administrative control, to take place within the North. Indeed, out of fifty-three members of a Guatemalan fair trade coffee cooperative surveyed by Lyon, only three members were familiar with the term “fair trade” (2007:106). Moberg (2005) also points out that the social and environmental criteria for fair trade banana production originate in the European NGOs, rather than among the farmers themselves. Fair trade certification requires farmers to eliminate herbicide use, so in the Windward Islands, farmers adopted mechanical weed clearing. Many older farmers needed to hire younger men to complete this increased labor, thus raising wage expenses. Additionally, the use of weed cutters actually promoted the growth of one common weed. Moberg witnessed a debate over these standards at a meeting of a St. Lucia fair trade group, where one member who called the FLO certifiers “outsiders” who make unreasonable demands on the farmers received vigorous applause. Recognizing these sorts of disjunctures between various points on the commodity chain, Fisher writes the following:

To truly understand the fair-trade system, any good analysis must not be complicit in the ways that the language of equality, partnership, and mutual advantage so common in the descriptions made by fair traders are obscuring these power gaps in the current fair trade systems. [2007:81]

Hence, approaching the fair trade system through the framework of development—which is often more relevant to producers—becomes not only a valid task but a necessary one.

Additionally, the roots of particular fair trade organizations can sometimes be traced explicitly to development funding. For instance, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) played an important role in the cooperative movement in Guatemala through a \$23 million loan for the development of rural cooperatives in the 1970s (Lyon

2007:101). Not all cooperatives can access fair trade markets equally (see Moberg 2005, Smith 2007), but because democratic organization of producers is a priority of fair trade, cooperatives offer an extant form through which to participate in the system. The Santiago Atitlán coffee cooperative in which Sarah Lyon conducted research formed through encouragement and aid from a Catholic development organization in the late 1970s. They then began exporting fair-trade and organic-certified coffee in 1991. Lyon thus sets out to “evaluate fair trade’s potential as a form of alternative development” (2007:100).

MayaWorks, too, traces its roots to a particular development organization, as seen on the website’s answer to the question, “How and when did MayaWorks begin?”:

MayaWorks grew out of Behrhorst Partners for Development, founded by the late Dr. Carroll Behrhorst who dedicated his life to the rural poor of Guatemala. He persistently advocated for women's income-generating projects as essential to health and community development.

Jeannie explained further that the pioneer of MayaWorks, Pat Krause, was a board member for the Behrhorst Foundation, which carries out participatory development initiatives in Guatemala, primarily in the field of health. Based on requests to help them reach beyond the saturated local markets, Krause began to sell Mayan women’s weavings through her church, family, and friends and “before she knew it,” had helped to form a 501(c)(3)¹¹ that ordered a shipment of products from the artisans every two months, which remains the practice of MayaWorks today. Until recently, MayaWorks actually rented its Guatemalan office space within the Behrhorst Foundation hospital in Chimaltenango. This history provides a clearer context for business’s origins as described on the website.

¹¹ Federal income tax-exempt non-profit

Literature on Development

Understanding fair trade organizations to be functioning as or similarly to development organizations has implications for how to approach the study of such organizations. First, in line with Escobar's work on development, in this study I give importance to the discourse of fair trade as "the process through which social reality comes into being; the articulation of knowledge and power, of the visible and the expressible" (1994). Fair trade discourse establishes a whole set of relations among businesses, NGOs, consumers, employees, farmers, artisans, certifiers, and many other individuals from the Global North and South. The discourse also gives power to some of those individuals to identify problems (economic disparity) in the current relationships and define strategies for remedying those problems (alternative priorities in economic exchanges). It thus becomes necessary to look at what that discourse is and what precisely it is doing among the various actors. It is important to distinguish, however, between the discourse of fair trade as a system and how my interlocutors are interpellated by that discourse, as I try to do in this paper.

In his discussion of the development apparatus in Lesotho, James Ferguson also recognizes that discourse is a practice with real effects. He therefore points out the need to distinguish between plans and effects in such studies, declaring, "intentional plans are always important but never in quite the same way the planners imagined" (1994:20). The intentional plans of fair trade have been described in myriad iterations that approximate the following: "to address the gross imbalances in information and power that typify North-South supplier-buyer relationships by countering the current failures evident in many global markets" (Nicholls and Opal 2005:6). Studies mentioned earlier that assess the "benefits" and "limitations" of fair trade speak to the distinction between plans and effects, but they can also fall into the good/bad debate

that Ferguson avoided. Entering that debate takes for granted the plans of fair trade, whereas I want to look at the particulars about what the fair trade system purports to do, and more importantly how it professes to do that. Following Ferguson, my discussion will not focus on wholesale approval or condemnation of the fair trade system. I want to denaturalize even the plans of fair trade in order find out about what it means to various people involved in the Global North.

Fair Trade as a Social Movement

Disaggregating plans and effects sets up the study of fair trade as a *system* with particular modes of operation that call and act upon particular people. A development-framed analysis does not preclude understanding fair trade as a social movement. In fact, looking at that aspect of the discourse is particularly important for understanding how the system operates on political subjects of the North, the focus of my study. The way in which fair trade gets articulated as a social movement is as the sum of individual actions by conscious Northern consumers looking to make social change.

According to Murray and Raynolds, fair trade fits into a range of movements, campaigns and initiatives that respond to the negative effects of globalization. Some of the most criticized effects of globalization, such as free trade, deregulation of markets, and loss of protections for workers, producers and consumers, are part and parcel of the neoliberal economic order. In the latter half of the last century, social movements shifted focus from a national level to a global one. Market-based approaches, such as the 1977 Nestlé boycott or the South Africa divestment campaign, directed pressures for economic and social changes at corporations, not states (2007:6-7). In the mid-1990s mass media in the Global North paid much attention to issues of worldwide sweatshops, unfair labor practices, and child labor. This attention fostered college

activism and greater consumer interest in the social conditions of a product's creation. The popularity of anti-sweatshop campaigns is often cited as an influence on the growth of fair trade as a movement (Grimes 2000; Benz Ericson 2002; DeCarlo 2007)¹². Paradoxically, the rise in fair trade has been facilitated in part by some key features of globalization, such as improved transportation and communication systems, which create access to global goods and global identities. Murray and Raynolds thus appropriately call fair trade part of a "new globalization" movement rather than a form of anti-globalization. They describe the movement as a set of groups linked through membership associations like FLO and the Fair Trade Federation and claim, "Trade- and market-based strategies for social change have become a central feature of contemporary popular struggles for social justice" (2007:4-9). What this formula of a social movement says about contemporary political subjectivities is something that I will explore through the example of fair trade.

Sarah Lyon (2006) and Carolyn Fisher (2007), in contrast to Raynolds et al., approach the categorization of the fair trade system as a social movement more critically. Based on her discussions with fair trade coffee roasters and advocates, Lyon points out that although advocates are consumers, not all fair trade consumers are activists. She contends, "fair trade is perhaps better understood as a 'consumer-dependent' movement for change rather than a consumer-led movement" (456). Similarly, Fisher proposes a view of fair trade as a social movement with a limited number of active participants (e.g. students, church members, NGO employees) and a large base of consumer supporters. She arrives at this proposal after questioning whether choosing one product over another constitutes activism. Searching for less restrictive ways to talk about social movements and transformation, she notes that people act in many realms of their lives with the intention of challenging hegemonic systems. After comparing three

¹² Today fair trade is also closely associated with "green" and organic trends in consumer culture.

theoretical interpretations, Fisher concludes that none of these can adequately characterize the fair trade system totally. Instead she suggests that we look at the system as “articulating modes of social transformation” (79). In this sense, fair trade may resemble a social movement more in some contexts, just as it may resemble a development tool more in others. Fair trade’s functioning as economic development, therefore, should be highlighted in order to frame how to study the system as a whole, but the way that fair trade discourse positions Northerners as political agents in a social movement is also important for understanding their participation in relation to other systems in which they are enmeshed.

Fair Trade Northerners as Political Subjects

Several of the publications from the limited literature that highlight a Northern perspective in fair trade emerge directly from the discourse of the fair trade system. In *Fair Trade: A Beginners’ Guide* Jacqueline DeCarlo (2007) addresses Northern audiences with descriptions of the principles and practices of the fair trade system, its histories, important players, challenges, and success stories. She argues, “Through Fair Trade, consumers can help themselves and others meet their basic and sustainable needs. With Fair Trade modern consumers can rethink some of the entrenched attitudes of our generation” (8). In its coverage and arguments, the book offers a more detailed, yet compact version of the contents of the websites of major fair trade organizations¹³. As former director of the Fair Trade Resource Network and current fair trade program advisor of Catholic Relief Services, DeCarlo is well-positioned to reiterate and expand upon the promotion-oriented discourse of the fair trade system, which she notes, “encompasses a diverse array of interpretations and manifestations,” even though she employs the term Fair Trade “as if it were a monolith” (2007:7). Rose Benz Ericson’s

¹³ Such as the Fair Trade Federation.

booklet, *The Conscious Consumer: Promoting Economic Justice Through Fair Trade*, published by the Fair Trade Resource Network in 2002, likewise covers the basics of the fair trade system's goals and statistics. These sorts of fair-trade produced materials will provide the touchstones for my analysis of fair trade discourse as it operates on a wider level than that of particular individuals in my case study, who nevertheless help to shape the discourse.

A theme among academic studies addressing Northern involvement in fair trade is the questioning of whether the system de-fetishizes commodities. Marx's (1992) concept of commodity fetishism describes the process in a capitalist system whereby the social relationships that are the basis of the exchange become hidden and the value added to commodities appears to be an objective property. Fair trade advocates and publications emphasize the relationship between traders and producers, suggesting some aspects of de-fetishization, but Fisher (2007) rejects the appropriateness of applying this frame to the fair trade system. Positing that commodity fetishism theories carry dichotomies of traditional/modern and Western/non-Western, she disagrees with the implication of fair trade as a moral "return" to the past. She also cautions that the framing of fair trade as a de-fetishizing process, while useful for marketing and activism, obscures continuing power gaps between its northern and southern participants.

Conversely, Sarah Lyon (2006) and Mathias Zick Varul (2008)¹⁴ accept the claim that fair trade marketing at least partially de-fetishizes commodities. Lyon writes, "Knowledge of where the products are produced and how they are connected to wider cultural and political trends is a critical component of consumer choice and participation within the alternative market" (2006:457). Both authors, however, go on to critique how the task of de-fetishization gets accomplished in the fair trade system. For Lyon, the work of personalizing production

¹⁴ Varul analyzes fair trade ethics in relation to "the moral grammar of capitalism" by looking at marketing campaigns by two fair traders—Traidcraft and Divine Chocolate.

through information about the producers and the process also functions as a commodification of difference:

Consumers purchase fair trade coffee in order to assist Southern producers who are fundamentally different from themselves...Cosmopolitan fair trade consumers seek to immerse themselves in other cultures and engage with the 'other'...In doing so, they make visible categorical differences between the consuming self and the producing other. [2006:457-58]

Similarly, Varul argues that fair trade's act of de-fetishization "in its one-sidedness and incompleteness," creates a "romantic commodification" of people based on distance and authenticity that has the following effect: "the authentic fair trade producer remains solely a *producer* without ever becoming a full member of the global *consumer* society" (2008:660-63). While these analyses are valuable for demonstrating how discursive attempts at de-fetishization are constructed, Varul and Lyon stop short of evaluating what is omitted from fair trade stories. In this paper I pick up on that thread by analyzing how the political, historical, and economic contexts of the producers' lives are excluded from such stories.

Daniel Reichman describes coffee as "a medium through which people imagine and reflect upon their place in a system of production and exchange" (2008:108). Discussing regulation in the broad sense of "the ways in which a defined social group controls economic behavior in the name of collective principles" (103), he looks at the levels at which various people locate injustice along a non-fair-trade commodity chain originating in Honduras. At a particular farm where Reichman conducted fieldwork, the coffee pickers blamed the owner for their low wages and thus targeted him for violence. The owner himself roasted and sold a portion of the coffee at an employee lounge in JFK airport; however, he made little money because only national coffee brands could sell in the actual airport terminals. The farm owner thus blamed national brands for limiting his business growth. Reichman questions why people's

contemplation of their global economic positions leads to private responses, and he makes an analogy between the political subjectivities he describes and the individualized location of injustice that fair trade Northerners enact by attempting to improve the lives of Southerners through changes in their own consumption patterns. While I found Reichman's thinking compelling in line with my own prior observations, in my research I sought to discover whether his claims about the individualized location of injustice could be supported by actual interviews and participant observation with the Northerners involved in fair trade.

Indeed, most of the academic studies of Northerners involved in fair trade do not derive from qualitative fieldwork with those participants, but Carolyn Fisher (2007) offers one such examination. Based on conversations with fair trade employees and activists; analysis of fair-trade companies' websites, internal documents, and newsletters; and participant observation at fair-trade activist events, she analyzes how fair trade Northerners interpret the fair trade system itself, ultimately arriving at the framework of "articulating modes of social transformation" discussed above. My paper builds on Fisher's article by paying attention to how they Northern fair trade advocates understand their involvement within the context of the larger global economic system.

Up from Where? The Anthropologist's Position and Studying Across

Women at MayaWorks understand the fair trade system as complex, and they identify similar issues and paradoxes to the one written about by academics. For instance, Sarah Cunningham told me about a debate at one Fair Trade Federation conference over how far back on the commodity chain "fair trade" gets defined. The director from the Guatemalan office attended the session and pointed out that in spite of the question's seeming obviousness to Northerners, if all the cotton for handwoven products had to be distinctly fair trade, then the MayaWorks

artisans could not afford to do their work. That MayaWorks staff member was one of “only a handful” of indigenous participants at the conference of 500 people. I include this story as one short example in order not to egotistically privilege the analyses of myself or any other researcher on fair trade above the complicated understandings and feelings that MayaWorks staff members hold.

Before moving on to my findings and analysis, then, I want to return to Nader’s idea of “studying up” and unpack it somewhat in terms of my positionality as a researcher. The question I want to ask is this: are the directions of study—whether up, down, or sideways—in relation to a seemingly objective view of cultures and society, or are they in relation to the anthropologist herself? In Nader’s account, U.S. society is hierarchical, and the higher levels need to be studied. To give an example, she argued that the prevalence of studies about lower-class crimes has aided the public definition of “law and order problems” in those terms, while ignoring the relationships to and effects of white-collar crime. Nader thus framed the “directions of study” as if researchers approach them from an objective standpoint by choosing a particular level to study, yet the options to study “up” or “down” have implications for and about the anthropologists’ position within the research.

The lack of research on Northern fair trade distributors and consumers, for instance, points to questions of power *within* anthropology, a discipline which historically earned the title of “handmaiden to colonialism.” According to Hugh Gusterson, “participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure” (1997:115). He revisited the concept of studying up to assess how much work had been done in this vein since Nader’s original call. While ethnographies of U.S. society generally have become more acceptable since Nader’s article, Gusterson claims, “The best-known examples of repatriated anthropology

involve studying across or studying down more than studying up” (1997:114). He considers this tendency to be a result of the difficulties of ethnographers gaining access to sites of power, like corporations or weapons laboratories, in contrast to the small communities where the rule of colonialism provided *entrée*.

The assumption in Gusterson’s statement, “participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure,” and his subsequent discussion of the problem of access, is that anthropologists are not at the top of the social structure. It is in the issue of access where the differentiation between directions of study from a societal standpoint and directions of study in relationship to the anthropologist is most evident. The people with whom I conducted fieldwork are in positions of power in terms of global economic capital, but in relation to myself (the ethnographer), the power disparity is minimal. That is to say, since the people who work at non-profit FTOs and purchase fair trade products are primarily middle-class white folks with university degrees (DeCarlo 2007:34), they do not exercise the same magnitude of power in U.S. society that corporate heads and government officials do.

Since I am myself a middle-class white person pursuing a university education, my own direction of study, when defined by a relation between myself and my interlocutors, can appropriately be characterized as “studying across.” Unlike Gusterson, I did not face problems of access in my goal of undertaking participant observation at MayaWorks. The fact that a university student writing an honors thesis wanted to research the topic of fair trade seemed natural (and non-threatening) to my interlocutors at the non-profit business.¹⁵ So if it does not raise issues of access, then what unique challenges does “studying across” engender?

¹⁵ Students from DePaul University and other Chicago colleges regularly intern or volunteer at MayaWorks. In addition to the normalcy of students connecting to the organization, my gender undoubtedly played a role in naturalizing my interest in MayaWorks. Not all fair trade handicrafts are produced by women (e.g. woodcarvings

A significant challenge arises in *writing* an ethnography that exists in a space of studying up societally and studying across in terms of positionality. The thrust of Nader's argument recommends a critical view of society. Critical anthropologists are no longer satisfied with studying cultures for the basic purpose of understanding people different from ourselves. We should use our people-centered perspective to analyze important issues in society. But how does the critical standpoint affect what Catherine Besteman (interview with author, November 17, 2007) calls the "central ethic of trust" upon which ethnographic relationships are based? The staff members at MayaWorks graciously shared their time and interests with me, and I did not have to experience "culture shock" in order to identify with them. Nor did I feel as though I lost track of my own concerns and reference points by trying to understand their views—what Carol Cohn described as having "fallen down the rabbit hole" in her study of nuclear defense intellectuals (2004:354). I genuinely enjoyed my time studying "across" with the women at MayaWorks, so is it possible for me to accomplish the task of studying "up"—to critically analyze the discourse and way in which people relatively powerful people *do* fair trade—without devaluing my interlocutors' goals and work?

Elizabeth Sheehan (1993) faced the challenge of writing from different directions of study during research about university academics' participation in the public sphere of politics, social reform, and cultural debate. She points out that others in her graduate cohort faced this challenge as well, but they were unable to receive sufficient guidance for writing about powerful informants. Sheehan's ethnography involved leading intellectuals in Ireland, where academics play an important role in national political life. In her dissertation, she chose to "protect" her informants by obscuring their identities. She claims that this approach allowed her to subtly align

from Kenya), but backstrap weaving has traditionally been women's work among the Maya, and the U.S. Americans involved in the MayaWorks network are overwhelmingly women.

with the “elite’s victims;” however, she reflects on the choice with discomfort, as it did not adequately represent her polyvalent position of being “in one sense a colleague studying across, in another a student studying up, and in yet another a social scientist studying down” (87).

The AAA code of ethics demands that anthropologists be honest in their research methods by using such procedures as informed consent. Perhaps the best way to resolve the dilemma of writing studies “up” from perspectives “across” is to be equally straightforward in describing the goals of our written work. To do that in this study, two points of clarification are necessary. First, the critical lens from studying “up” allows me to denaturalize the assumptions and practices of fair trade as a *system*. My arguments here concern the discourse of fair trade and the various ways that it shapes the functioning of that system. I consider the Northerners involved—at MayaWorks and many places—to be active participants in re-producing fair trade discourse, but none of my arguments are set up to analyze individuals within this system. Rather, it is the ideology shaping their actions that interests me.

The second distinction to be made is between pointing out limitations and devaluing a project. Although I ultimately conclude that the way fair trade discourse constructs Southern producers and conceives of social change limits the possibilities for structural changes in global trade, I am not condemning fair trade. A truly valuable critical lens does not write off parts of social worlds but opens new questions about what ways of thinking, being, and acting are possible in those worlds. These conditions of possibilities (Escobar 1994) are not static, and will continue to morph as the fair trade system grapples with its current challenges and contradictions.

Ethnographies, like all stories that are not the actual experience of living, are partial truths; I could have focused my research on a variety of aspects of the business where I did my case study. From the perspectives of the U.S. staff members, MayaWorks is accomplishing its

stated mission of providing income and building relationships with Mayan women. During twelve years of business, the organization has never failed to make its promised bimonthly order from the partner artisans in Guatemala. The U.S. staff members' accounts from frequent travel to Guatemala and the testimonies of artisans in their promotional materials speak to the importance of this regular income in having, for example, three meals a day, additions on their house, or school supplies for children. Additionally, for the U.S. staff members and volunteers, the connections made with Mayan women are very real and strong. MayaWorks product manager Sarah, for instance, told me smilingly about an artisan group known as "the laughing ladies of the hills," who always laugh and joke with her when she works with them. Resting her hands over her heart, she said, "Every group I visit, though, I'm just so touched by them." The staff members also described the ten Mayan artisans who came to the U.S. for MayaWorks' ten-year anniversary celebration as having been very moved to discover the volume of people connected to their work.¹⁶ The gendering of these globalized connections in a context of supposed post-modern alienation could be the topic of another whole research project. This point demonstrates there are many questions that can be asked about the fair trade system. My interest here is to raise specific ones about representations of inequality and power in fair trade discourse.

The issues of trust and purpose that arise in the writing process intersect with another challenge of studying simultaneously up and across. As an aspiring public/activist anthropologist, I take it as a given that any work I do with groups of people "less powerful" than myself should be not only relevant to the public as Peacock (1997) suggests, but also valuable to that community's needs and goals. However, a strange thing happens when I shift my research focus to Northern consumers, reflecting my own development-patterned understanding of Southerners

¹⁶ Some of the artisan groups meet MayaWorks volunteers and others through the yearly tours that the staff leads to Guatemala.

as primarily “people in need”: I am less certain of my ability to make active contributions to the community of my interlocutors when they are ostensibly in similar positions of power as myself in U.S. society. Do I not owe these people relevant, beneficial responses to what I observe in the same way that I would owe them to more marginalized groups in society? In anthropology I have learned to have solidarity with the relatively less powerful people of the world by reading the work of Paul Farmer and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, as well as to question the impacts of the “powerful” on the first category’s lives (i.e. “studying up”), but I have not yet discovered how to interact with the forms of power that lie in between those extremes.

Interestingly, this puts me as a researcher in a parallel position to that of my interlocutors as fair trade advocates. I argue in this paper that through fair trade, middle-class Northerners attempt to grapple with being neither among the “powerless” in global society nor among the powerful elites in U.S. society. Importantly, the fair trade system highlights for Northerners that it is not just the highest elites who exercise global power. If my own struggle over how to contribute to my interlocutors’ community (however defined) derives from dilemmas similar to those that motivate their work, then hopefully through the questions I am opening up about the discursive context of that work, my interlocutors and I will begin a dialogue in which we can mutually explore the middle-grounds of power and formulate new ways of knowing and acting in our relationships with each other and in society—as fair trade participants or otherwise.

Chapter 4. Assumptions of Injustice in Fair Trade Discourse

The fair trade system is predicated on an acknowledgement of injustice in the world. The term “fair trade” itself initiates this discursive construction. The modifier in this term marks a difference from “trade” as a term on its own. The specific modifier of “fair” implies that plain-and-simple “trade” is *unfair*. Of course, this distinction is precisely the point. The Fair Trade Federation’s website says, “this system of exchange seeks to create greater equity and partnership in the international trading system.” If the dominant trade system were fair, then the “fair trade” system would not have arisen. That is the assumption that goes into the system’s existence, but here I will look at how the discourse relies on basic assumptions about global injustice at a more general level than specific international trade practices. It is recognition of such injustice that makes the solutions offered by fair trade possible.

Global Needs and the Need to Make a Difference

The clearest example of the generalized assumption of global injustice in fair trade discourse comes from *Fair Trade: A Beginner’s Guide*. In her introductory chapter DeCarlo describes the gap between the rich and poor using U.N. statistics about how much money people need to lead “basic, decent” lives and how few people make that much money. She points out that the United States constitutes four percent of world’s population but consumes twenty-five percent of the planet’s energy resources, and then declares, “I am not going to deconstruct history and blame inequality on colonialism or corruption or even capitalism. I am merely going to point out what you probably already suspect: this type of disparity is not acceptable” (2007:5).

That basic premise of fair trade—the unacceptability of poverty primarily in the South—appears more subtly in MayaWorks materials. The organization commonly mails out quarter-page announcement cards to communicate with volunteers and customers. These cards are

printed on seasonally colored paper and usually serve one of two purposes: to solicit volunteer involvement, or to announce upcoming sales. The first type of card suggests dates for holding sales¹⁷ and encourages the volunteer to invite their family, friends, coworkers, and community to the events. These cards typically note that hosting a sale will provide income to Mayan families, and some of them suggest that it is a “fun, satisfying way to make a difference.”

The “making a difference” motif commonly appears at the top of the second type of card. Before listing the dates and locations of upcoming MayaWorks sales, the sales announcement cards begin with exclamations such as “shop to make a difference,” “shop for peace and social justice,” or “your purchase makes a difference to families in Guatemala.” That poverty is the object of the action of “making a difference” goes without saying in these advertisements. The existence of poverty is implied through the possibility of generating income suggested by lengthier statements in brochures, like the following:

Your purchase of these products provides Mayan women an opportunity to earn income from their skills and gives them self-confidence as well as hope for themselves, their families and their communities. MayaWorks’ sales generate income for meeting basic family needs: food, shelter, healthcare and schooling.

In the two examples of one-pagers pictured below, the assumption that income goes toward addressing poverty in Mayan communities appears in the explanation of what happens to the money from crafts purchases. According to the ads, the money from these purchases, “can’t save the world, but it can make a world of difference.”

¹⁷ e.g. Fair Trade Day, Mother’s Day, International Women’s Month

What good is your money?



It can't save the world, but it can make a world of difference.

When you purchase hand-crafted products from Maya Works 75 cents of each dollar return to Guatemala. It pays the artisans and goes into microloan and scholarship funds that provide women like this the opportunity to start businesses or get an education. Your money is recycled into hope for their future. Maya Works is a member of the Fair Trade Federation ensuring that the artisans who create MayaWorks do so in a safe environment for a living wage.



MayaWorks
Interweaving Lives, Discovering One World

www.mayaworks.org

Thank you for the pig and cows.



They haven't saved the world, but they've made a world of difference.

When you purchase hand-crafted products from Maya Works 75 cents of each dollar return to Guatemala. It pays the artisans and goes into scholarship and microloan funds that help women like these buy looms or pigs or cows to start businesses. It enables them to improve the quality of their lives and that of their families. Your money is recycled into hope for their future. Maya Works is a member of the Fair Trade Federation ensuring that the artisans who create MayaWorks do so in a safe environment for a living wage.



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Interweaving Lives, Discovering One World

www.mayaworks.org

One slightly more specific explanation of the needs of Mayan women to earn income offered by MayaWorks is their identities as widows. For instance, one of the volunteers I spoke with told me that she knows “a little” about Guatemala, such as why the women there need work: During the political violence (of the 1980s and early 1990s) the women were widowed. With “so many husbands lost,” the women have to be able to support themselves. The answer to the question, “How and when did MayaWorks begin?” on the MayaWorks website also suggests this causal relationship:

MayaWorks began in 1990 with one suitcase of placemats woven by widows whose husbands had been killed by the violence which plagued the Guatemalan Highlands during the 1980's. A volunteer carried the suitcase back to the U.S. and quickly sold its contents. [website FAQs]

Thus, the widowhood of some Mayan artisans provides a basic background to the acknowledgement of women's poverty and the need for fair trade sales.

Transformative Power of Fair Trade

Narratives of change in the success stories offered by fair trade discourse also illustrate how injustice within producer communities is the taken-for-granted basis of the system. I will use five short films from the "Meet the Farmers" page of Divine Chocolate's website as examples. Divine Chocolate is made from cocoa that comes from Kuapa Kokoo, a fair trade farmers' co-operative of Ghana. Each film profiles a person connected to the co-operative, and four of the five films are accompanied by synopses of the person's life and the message of their video profile. In these films, fair trade figures as a character that contributes to the communities' abilities to overcome a challenge.

In the film titled "the well," for instance, a Kuapa Kokoo member named Gladys talks about the installation of a well and water pipe in her community through the social premium¹⁸ paid from fair trade. Her narrative follows a before and after structure: previously, community members walked three miles to collect water from the river. This limited the amount of water, took up energy and time, and the water was unclean. Now, "thanks to Kuapa," the community has more time for work, school, and sleep, and they are a model to other communities, who praise their "sweet" water.

The other films imply a narrative of change, but the "before" aspect is not as explicit. For example, in one titled "Empowerment for Women," Comfort Kumeah tells the story of how she

¹⁸ In addition to a minimum price on certified fair trade products, distributors pay a set "social premium" to farmer groups. According to the TransFair USA website, the social premium "is a key and unique feature of the Fair Trade system. Farmers and farm workers decide democratically how to invest it, in projects ranging from infrastructure improvements to health initiatives to scholarship funds." To meet TransFair USA's standards, buyers pay a minimum price \$1.25 per pound for certified fair trade coffee, and a social premium paid of \$0.10 per pound.

went from being a local farmer to being “at the top” in her current position as the national secretary of the farmers union. She notes that twelve years ago she would not have believed that she would be in that position now, but she does not describe life for women at that time. In the film titled “The Recorder,” Elias emphasizes his elected role in the cooperative and the trust that other farmers hold in him. Elias’ quotations in the written description below the video offer further explanation of the difference made by democratic organization: “There was one cocoa buying company represented in this village when I came here, but they were cheating us and not paying us on time. Twenty of us decided to join Kuapa Kokoo as we had heard it was a fair and democratic organisation. We found it was true...Kuapa Kokoo is a very good company. Every week farmers contribute their ideas, and every four years important positions are contested and elected.”

In order to highlight the positive power of fair trade as a force for change in producer communities, these brief films build on an assumption of inequality and injustice at an unclear point of origin before fair trade. While another page on Divine’s website, “Cocoa from Ghana,” discusses the history of cocoa farming in Ghana, the Kuapa Kokoo story never clearly explains what exactly fair trade is “better” than—in terms of global trade, gender relationships, and other social institutions like schools. The history page, for instance, confusingly says that a structural adjustment program had a negative effect on farmers but that liberalization also created the opportunity for private licenses, of which Kuapa Kokoo took advantage. These fair trade stories thus rely on selective representations of power: The transformative power of fair trade is represented through examples of Kuapa Kokoo meeting specific goals of the system,¹⁹ but the forms of power that fair trade has apparently overcome remain unexplained.

¹⁹ i.e. democratic organization, social premiums for community development, women’s empowerment

Seeing as a Way of Knowing Poverty

If Northerners take the injustice of global trade and unequal distribution of wealth for granted in their participation in the fair trade system, then the question we must ask is what thought processes enables them to do so? First, since fair trade is viewed as a tool for development, ideas about the need for “improvement” and “progress” in Other (non-Western) poor places forms the ideological backdrop of the fair trade system. Processes facilitated by globalization legitimize these ideas. Through access to photography, video, and Internet, Northerners can *see* poverty around the world, whether it is in news images of people in shantytowns, UN posters depicting refugees, or television commercials featuring malnourished kids along with a pleas to donate to international relief agencies. In addition to seeing poverty from a distance, many Northerners also gain exposure to these realities in “other” places through their ability to visit such locations. Among the women of the MayaWorks network, travel experience becomes a way of knowing about poverty in the Global South.

Each of the women who work at the MayaWorks office in Chicago has lived in Guatemala. Jeannie worked as a PeaceCorps volunteer in Mazatenango doing youth development programs from 1988-1991. She also met her husband there during that time. She called her experience a lot of fun; however, she noted that “there were still some places we weren’t allowed to go”, such as Quiche, because of ongoing political violence.

Sarah also spent time working in Guatemala, although she did not set out to do so. After graduating from college she started traveling through Central America and ended up staying in the indigenous community of Todos Santos after getting a job as a liaison between the Spanish-speaking teachers and the English-speaking students at a language school. She recalled her experience fondly, but when I asked why she left, she also explained the difficulties of the

experience. The town has an extremely high alcoholism rate, which she said in conjunction with noting no one has land. Geographically, the area is difficult to reach, and the climate is cold. She described climbing the hill on which she lived and seeing people lying on the side of the road dying from hypothermia as the rain water drained downward. She keeps in touch with someone in Vermont that she knew through the experience, and that person has told her about several people they knew who have died since then, including the mother from the family with whom her traveling partner stayed for the first few weeks. She said that it is so tough there that everyone just has to take care of themselves and that they are unable to look out for their neighbors.

Naomi studied abroad in Guatemala as an undergraduate student, and she said that she lived in a “very, very poor” indigenous community²⁰ that had been devastated by the earthquake of 1976. Each of the women drew on their living experiences when discussing current issues in Guatemala, but Naomi made the most direct connection between what she saw living there and the necessity of the MayaWorks mission:

I think being in Guatemala and just learning as much as I could in the short time that I was there, I see a real connection between creating markets that are fair instead of what the public doesn't necessarily see, but you know as creating work that is through sweatshops or unfair labor.

For volunteers, too, the knowledge of poverty and injustice in Guatemala often comes from travel experience. As Naomi said:

I think a lot of [the volunteers] have...a lot of people have actually traveled to Central America and seen the realities there, so I think they just really have a connection with creating work for artisans, because especially in Guatemala, you see beautiful woven colorful things everywhere.

In fact, the MayaWorks staff members lead yearly tours to Guatemala as one way to raise awareness about the organization's mission. Jeannie explained the tours thusly:

²⁰ The community was located in Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan.

I like to describe them as geo-tours, because we go there, we do some sight seeing, but the majority of the tour is North American women meeting with our artisans in their homes, eating meals with them, learning from their families, spending time with them, seeing how they live, and talking about what their struggles are in Guatemala and then also our women here discussing what their struggles here are in the United States. And just having that exchange.

All three of the staff members identified these tours as a valuable tool for solidifying people's interest in participating in the MayaWorks network because of the deeper meaning the tour participants receive from their personal interactions with the artisans. As Sarah put it, "They wanna stay involved because it isn't just something that they saw on the Internet, you know. They were there; they met these people." Additionally, at a lunch when Jeannie listed their top-selling volunteer's extensive experience and knowledge of the organization as reasons she was being asked to join the MayaWorks executive board, that volunteer added that her experience having been on one of the tours was valuable, too. The staff members all agreed, and Sarah said that, "going there is key."

Moreover, the staff members used the idea of "going there" to discursively establish that "difference" that MayaWorks' makes. If seeing poverty is a way of knowing that change is necessary, then establishing relationships with the artisans provides a way of knowing that the work they do is worthwhile. The women cited the fact that "MayaWorks knows exactly who all of their artisans are" as an important and unique feature of the business. They contrasted that feature to wholesalers who "know the stories" and "see the pictures" but do not have personal relationships with the artisans, as well as to organizations that join on to fair trade as a trend or use it as a buzz word, "but maybe they don't know the artisans at all." Thus, the long-term, personal relationships MayaWorks has created with artisans in Guatemala contributes to the authenticity of their work as a specifically fair trade organization. An excerpt from my phone

interview with Sarah provides an example of how knowing the artists and “going there” allows the staff to measure the difference their work makes:

I think some of the changes that you see when you go, like when we go on the tours we're going to visit the artisans, and when we're going down to design work we'll go to the artisans' homes, and we'll do workshops there. So it's kind of a thing that you pick up from just being there. You know, you see that they've made an addition on their home, or that they've put in a new smokestack for their ovens in their kitchen, is something that's happened with some of the groups.

Conclusion

While the term “fair trade” connotes a problem in the dominant trade system, the overall discourse of the fair trade system relies on a more general assumption of disparity throughout the world. In the case of women connected to MayaWorks, knowledge of economic injustice often comes from experiences traveling in the global South, where *seeing* people's lesser degrees of wealth leads to participation in “making a difference” through fair trade. This explanation is similar to what Graham Burchell describes as the motivation for writing histories of the present²¹:

[It is] the experience of not being a citizen of the community or republic of thought and action in which one nevertheless is unavoidably implicated or involved. It is an experience of being in a goldfish bowl in which one is obliged to live but in which it seems impossible to live, that is to think and act. An experience in which what one is oneself is, precisely, in doubt...And this experience is one that involves, quite directly, the relations it is possible to enter into or maintain with others. And, of course, it involves the relations one has with practices of government. [1996:30]

According to Burchell, this experience calls for a certain perspective that he uses to analyze political thought, but his description also speaks to the motivating experience in fair trade. By “going there” and seeing poverty, Northerners must recognize their existence as members of the “haves” in a world understood to be divided between “haves” and “have-nots.” In the case of

²¹ An approach to analyzing social and political life that uses genealogies to discern the fragmentation of the present: “The historian of the present *reproblematizes*, that is to say engages in an activity that dismantles the coordinates of his or her starting point and indicates the possibility of a different experience, of a change in his or her way of being a subject or in his or her relation to self—and so also, of a change of others' selves” [Burchell 1996:31]

trade, Daniel Reichman claims that consumers in advanced capitalist countries are accustomed to certain standards of justice in commodity production²² and that weak international regulatory structures produce discomfort about “the realities of the global division of labor” (2008:102). Fair trade discourse, therefore, focuses on Northerners’ role as purchasers of global goods in order to identify the interconnections of the discomfiting goldfish bowl in which they live. Decarlo’s book, for instance, includes a chapter titled “Fish don’t know they are wet *or* how trading influences our lives,” (2007:10-22). in which she highlights consumers’ daily participation in the global market in order to contrast the profit-driven motives of conventional trade to the people-centered model of fair trade.

When I asked one student how aware she was of fair trade prior to volunteering at MayaWorks, she responded that although she couldn’t remember when she first learned about fair trade, she had known about organizations that *weren’t* doing trade that way, and why it was bad.²³ Fair trade begins with an assumption about the negative condition of the global economic system and offers an alternative way of acting within that condition. The economic disparities of the world in which Northerners live and participate are thus rendered thinkable through the existence of fair trade as a method for changing these visible/known realities. In the next section I will investigate how such change becomes practicable.

²² In my fieldwork, these standards were articulated primarily as fair wages and safe working conditions.

²³ When I asked what she mean by “bad,” she talked about the poor working conditions and unfair wages.

Chapter 5. The Individualized Response to Inequality

In the last section, I argued that fair trade discourse posits the system as exercising transformative power on an assumed field of global injustice. In this section, I will discuss where the discourse locates the source of that transformative power: individual consumers. Important to my analysis of how fair trade discourse positions Northerners as agents of change are an understanding of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense of the art of government—“the conduct of conduct”—and neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism is a form of government that took hold after World War II (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996), the same time that fair trade models began to form. According to Graham Burchell, neo-liberalism defines a problem-space of government in which:

Government must work for the game of market competition and as a kind of enterprise itself, and new quasi-entrepreneurial and market models of action or practical systems must be invented for the conduct of individuals, groups and institutions within those areas of life hitherto seen as being either outside of or even antagonistic to the economic. [1996: 27]

Neo-liberalism rejects state social programs that supposedly lead to inefficient and excessive government. Promoting independent models of action suited to “an enterprise culture,” neo-liberalism promotes the *autonomization* of society through privatization and the “free market” (Burchell 1996:27-29). The possible outcomes of these techniques vary widely, but Burchell identifies some consistency:

It also seems to be the case that these forms encourage the governed to adopt a certain entrepreneurial form of practical relationship to themselves as a condition of their effectiveness and the effectiveness of this form of government. A characteristic form [“contractual implication”]...involves “offering” individuals and collectivities active involvement in action to resolve the kind of issues hitherto held to be the responsibility of authorized governmental agencies. However, the price of this involvement is that they must assume active responsibility for these activities, both for carrying them out and, of course, for their outcomes, and in so doing they are required to conduct themselves in accordance with the appropriate (or approved) model of action. [1996:29]

The fair trade system approaches the necessity of remedying economic inequality through the *autonomization* of social change. That is, according to fair trade discourse, Northerners acting as individuals and in NGOs have the power to reduce poverty and injustice through their market interactions. Hence, although the system is not a state apparatus, fair trade discourse is nevertheless a form of governmentality in which individual consumption constitutes the fundamental technique.

Fair Trade Wants You!

“WORLD FAIR TRADE DAYS WANTS YOU!” is the headline on a Fair Trade Resource Network press release that encourages “you” to “promote Fair Trade and campaign for trade justice together with farmers and artisans around the world” by participating in activities such as the world’s largest fair trade coffee break. Targeting individuals with first-person directives is the discursive method through which the fair trade system positions itself as a social movement. Participants in World Fair Trade Day, for instance, will “join hundreds of thousands of people across the U.S. and in over 80 countries.” Although they may not act *alone*, the Northern participants nevertheless act *autonomously*, as demonstrated by the following excerpts from promotional materials:

Every individual is a citizen of the world and member of the global economy. Even as one individual, you can make a difference in the lives of many small-scale farmers and artisans currently living poverty.

–“Living the Fair Trade Life as an Individual,” in *Fair Trade Futures* action guide [2005:6]

When you shop for Fair Trade items through organizations such as Mayaworks [sic], you are not just purchasing some lovely and unique item – YOU are becoming the fair and reliable market that can change the dynamics of poverty in the world today.

–“What is all this beautiful stuff?”, a ½ page information sheet made by a MayaWorks volunteer for a sale at a church festival [2004]

These statements are just two examples among a multitude in fair trade materials that locate the power to transform economic inequality in the purchasing capacities of individual consumers.

Origin Stories

In fair trade discourse, the significance of individuals' actions to economic equality is reinforced not only through evidence of change in producer communities (see chapter 4), but also importantly through tales of particular Northerners who initiated fair trade projects. For instance, DeCarlo details the history of Ten Thousand Villages through the efforts of a Mennonite woman named Edna Byler bringing crafts back from Puerto Rico and selling them at her local sewing circle in 1946. DeCarlo explains the importance of this woman's story as follows:

Like many Fair Trade visionaries and practitioners, Byler volunteered her time and gave her money on behalf of her producer partners...I believe that the single-minded, generous, and visionary commitment of individuals like Byler—whether they be leaders of non-governmental organizations, small business owners, development practitioners, or self-motivated volunteers—is what has made the evolution of Fair Trade possible and its future optimistic. [2007:65-67]

Similarly, the narrative of one woman discovering a need for external market access among Mayan women, taking a suitcase full of woven items to the United States, and selling the contents locally is an important part of the MayaWorks story. I have already cited the website's brief version of this story (see page 23). According to the expanded versions shared with me by staff members, the founder of MayaWorks, Pat Krause, developed relationships with women in Chimaltenango through her work at the Behrhorst Foundation. Since those women were looking for ways to support their families and weaving was a skill passed on to them by their mothers, they asked Pat if she could help them sell their placemats. She began "schlepping" materials back to Connecticut to sell among her network of friends, particularly within her church community. After the rapid success of her first attempt, she repeated the practice, and "before she knew it they had formed a 501C(3)." A similar description of Krause's individual

initiative—albeit with some discrepancies in the small details—appears in various news articles about the organization.

Krause's own version of the MayaWorks origin story, printed in a booklet called "Interweaving Lives: A MayaWorks Backgrounder," actually includes several other characters. She explains that she received the first request for help selling weavings in 1990 from Felipa Xico, a member of *Mujeres en Accion* (Women in Action). This community group had formed around common concerns over cultivating crops, feeding their families, and marketing their weavings, the last goal being the one they saw Krause having the capacity with which to assist them. Krause also points out the presence of two other Northerners—Terry and Bob Davis—on the Behrhorst tour when she received Felipa's plea. In her story, we see again the identification of injustice through travel: "Terry will tell you today that she was so grateful that our help was requested. She had been restlessly pondering, 'How can I help? What can we do?' and the Women in Action placemats provided the answer!" The rest of Krause's backgrounder lays out the history of each artisan group's connections to MayaWorks, "so that all of us involved in MayaWorks can own the memories, claiming them as the beginnings of the grand unfinished weaving of which we're a part" (2002:2-3).

The difference between Krause's detailed version of MayaWorks history, which includes multiple actors in a "grand unfinished weaving" of human lives, and the more condensed interpretations of the organization's origins, which focus on the initiative of one individual from Connecticut, suggests the importance of that other Northerners (e.g. staff members, volunteers, and journalists) find in understanding what individuals can do when they read/hear and re-formulate the fair trade stories available to them. Excerpts from a Wisconsin newspaper column about MayaWorks illustrate this point:

In 1996 Pat Crause [sic], who already had connections in Guatemala, was packing to come back to the United States. A woman approached with a stack of woven placemats that she asked Pat to sell. They sold so quickly that Pat ordered more.

...What does this have to do with us? Not long ago I sat with a group of friends as we tried to define what a just response to unjust times like ours should be. We came to no grand conclusions, other than this. For middle class Americans, there are no sidelines in the struggle for a just society or a fair world. We are 6 percent of the world population, yet every year we whack through 30 percent of the world's consumption of resources. If we are not trying to be responsible with our economic power – then we are, ipso facto, part of the problem. [Danielson 2001]

In this excerpt, like the earlier passage from DeCarlo, the example of the fair trade initiator proceed to the conclusion that other Northerners, too, can exercise power through the marketplace. We can see, then, that the individualization in fair trade origin stories suggests to readers/listeners that making fair trade purchases is a *reproducible* way for consumers to create “the kind of world they want to live in” (DeCarlo 2007:5).

The Power of One: Fair Trade Superstars

At the Chicago Fair Trade meeting I attended, the organization's director told a story of a “fair trade superstar” named Carter O'Brien. O'Brien held a showing of *Black Gold*²⁴ at the Field Museum, where he works, after which he got the audience to sign a petition calling for the museum's McDonald's and Corner Bakery venues to carry fair trade coffee. He then held follow-up meetings with executives of these businesses, and his campaign succeeded. O'Brien will be receiving Chicago Fair Trade's first-ever “changemaker” award, which the director said will “highlight local people changing institutions and get people out there doing that.”

The individual, reproducible examples of change-making constructed by fair trade discourse appear in contexts other than the origin stories of specific FTOs. The *Fair Trade Futures* action guide, for instance, includes a section labeled “Small town success: One inspired

²⁴ The description from the film's website: “As westerners revel in designer lattes and cappuccinos, impoverished Ethiopian coffee growers suffer the bitter taste of injustice. In this eye-opening expose of the multi-billion dollar industry, *Black Gold* traces one man's fight for a fair price.”

retiree brings Fair Trade to his town” (2005:6). According to this profile, Larry Krantz of Bemidjii, Minnesota set out to educate his community about fair trade alternatives after witnessing “the extent of poverty and environmental degradation in other parts of the world” on a Global Exchange trip to Mexico. By collecting available fair trade materials, as well as creating his own and connecting the information to issues affecting Minnesotans, Larry has “bit by bit begun to change the face of Bemidjii.” The main text of the page featuring this profile describes ways that individuals can participate in fair trade “beyond your daily Fair Trade purchases”: for instance, education of friends, family, and co-workers about Fair Trade and advocacy to encourage stores to carry fair trade goods.

Corresponding to the generalized assumption of global injustice upon which fair trade is premised, the use of fair trade exemplars to illustrate individuals’ abilities to “make a difference” is not limited to the fair trade system. According to a program for “The Power of One: An Afternoon of Miracles,”²⁵ middle school students at a Jewish Day School in Chicago had the opportunity “to hear modern-day miracle workers, people who are involved in changing the world one person at a time.” Kathleen Morkert, the executive director of MayaWorks at the time, was one of those miracle workers who speaking on an afternoon shortly before Hanukah 2003. In thank-you notes to Kathleen, the students commented on the poverty of the Mayan people she described and expressed the hope that they saw in the MayaWorks mission. Sixth grader Hanah wrote, “I never knew what a difference one person can make in the world,” demonstrating her receipt of the program’s intended instruction. As the Power of One committee members put it in their own thank-you letter to Kathleen, “Perhaps one day, like you, one of our students will help to make our world a better place in which to live.”

²⁵ An item I found in the MayaWorks archival binders

Participation in Economic Justice

Like the Power of One committee, women of the MayaWorks network want fair trade initiators and superstars' impact on economic inequality to seem replicable. The organization's goal of giving women in the U.S. the opportunity to participate in economic justice highlights the ability of individuals to impact economic inequality. Volunteer sales create the primary venue for accomplishing that part of the mission. As Jeannie said, "In order for us to make changes in our own lives, we need to see how we affect the lives of other people. Women who are sensitive to issues around them and how their actions affect other women like having the opportunity to affect that directly—to do something about it." Pat Krause described the inclusion of U.S. women in selling products thusly:

Participation is as much a continual process of awareness that the world is not flat and the playing field isn't even, and that even small actions—a sale here or there, or telling the story here or there—can make the difference in our, uh, helping to make things...helping to give access to...to money, and to scholarships, and to credit through MayaWorks.

The Little Things

Pat Krause's suggestion that "small actions" make a difference speaks to an important element in fair trade's autonomizing discourse about transformative power and the market: the easiness of impacting economic inequality. When explaining her commitment to fair trade advocacy, a leader of the American University Fair Trade Student Association told me that fair trade "is something everyone can do." She noted that although not everybody is willing to make time to volunteer for social causes, it does not take extra time for someone to make an ethical choice of fair trade coffee each morning rather than non-fair trade coffee. By identifying common market interactions as the locus where change can be made, the discourse of "voting with your dollar" in fair trade tells Northerners that altering economic inequality need not be

difficult. For instance, the exclamation, “Shift 5% of the budget (just \$425) to products from Fair Trade businesses!” is printed in bold and set apart by extra spaces in *Fair Trade Futures*. “Even with such a small percentage of your purchases being funneled into the Fair Trade sector,” the action guide assures the reader, “you will make a big difference in the lives of artisans and small farmers at home and overseas” (2005:6).

One MayaWorks volunteer told me, “We interact with international trade every day. Every dollar we spend says something about us. I like what I pay for to say something good about me.” The ease of participating in the MayaWorks mission, however, is not just about buying goods. One of their volunteer solicitation cards highlights the “Three Easy Steps to a MayaWorks Sale”:

Order products at least 3 weeks before your sale. Send no money now.

Invite friends, family and coworkers to support Guatemalan families by purchasing beautiful, one-of-a-kind handicrafts.

Return unsold product to MayaWorks, along with payment for the items sold.

Jeannie suggested to me that people do not have time to think about the impact of every product they buy. Moreover, not all products are available through fair trade, nor is it possible to ensure that all of the people involved in all of our products are not harmed by what we purchase. She claimed, however, “If we think more about it, and we talk more about it, people will start demanding fairness” in the relations of production, and hopefully changes will be made. In contrast to Jeannie’s acknowledgement of the limitations of individuals who participate in the fair trade system, the *Fair Trade Futures* action guide claims, “Thanks to the simplicity of the Internet and catalog ordering, Fair Trade is an option no matter where you live” (2005:6). The assumption that the reader has access to the Internet indicates the boundaries of who actually participates in the fair trade system apart from the producers. The discourse of fair trade as a

social movement posits the availability of participation to all, but because transformative power is located in individuals' consumer actions, only people with access to Northern markets (whether through geography or Internet) and money to spend can exercise this form of power.

Conclusion

With the evidence just laid out, I return to Burchell's discussion of governmentality and the "interconnections, continuities and interactions between techniques of domination and techniques of the self" (1996:21). I have illustrated through examples from fair trade's promotional discourse and narratives about Northerners' involvement that fair trade discourse creates a neo-liberal response to economic inequality both in the responsibility it places on individual citizens and the finding of solutions in the marketplace.

According to Sarah Lyon, fair trade coffee "reflects cultural assumptions and anxieties surrounding free trade, corporate globalization and economic injustices and in the process politicizes everyday consumption practices." Reflecting on interviews with coffee roasters and advocates in the United States, she contends, "Consumers can purchase fair trade coffee to combat their feelings of political fatalism and chronic insecurity that many argue result from the sheer scale of contemporary social and economic change and the inability of national governments to control or resist it" (2006:456). Rather than political fatalism, the explanations for involvement that I found in the MayaWorks network fell more in line with Reichman's hypothesis about fair trade coffee consumers not having a systematic framework through which to comprehend their role as citizens in the global economy. Members in the MayaWorks network identify economic inequality—often through travel experience—and participation in the fair trade system offers a way for them to "do something about it."

The way that “doing something” about economic inequality becomes practicable in fair trade discourse is through assertions and examples of the *autonomization* of social change. As Reichman says, “[fair trade Northerners] resort to individual behavior as the source of political transformation, locating injustice (and the potential for justice) at the most immediate level possible” (2008:110). He views the political subjectivity embodied in fair trade as a product of systematic changes in the relationship between nation and the state. Discouraging a view of neo-liberalism as simply a negative response to the welfare state, Barry, Osborne, and Rose say the following:

This “retreat from the State” is also itself a positive technique of government; we are perhaps witnessing a “degovernmentalization of the State; but surely not “de-governmentalization” *per se*...what has been at issue has been the fabrication of techniques that can produce a degree of “autonomization” of entities of government from the State: here the State, allying itself with a range of other groups and forces, has sought to set up—in Latourian language—chains of enrolment, “responsibilization” and “empowerment” to sectors and agencies distant from the centre, yet tied to it through a complex of alignments and translations. [1996:11-12]

The exploding role of non-profits, including FTOs, in “filling the gaps” on social issues is thus an important effect of neo-liberalism. Pat Krause, the founder of MayaWorks, said as much when I asked her about the role of governments in economic justice:

I don't think it's always possible to do even the degree that governments might want to, and that's where I think the role—there's a real role for non-profits in being profits, and ambassadors...and voices to help these things happen.

Burchell explains that individuals’ relationships to themselves may be altered by their new relationships with neo-liberal government “without it being clear that the outcomes that are supposed to justify this rationality of government are in fact being achieved” (1996:29). In its particular construction of power, fair trade discourse calls upon people who “fashion themselves” as concerned global citizens to do so through conscious purchasing. By so doing, it

places the both the possibility and the responsibility for change in the power of the consumer.

Thus, as a neo-liberal form of governmentality, the fair trade system has particular consequences for how individuals' political subjectivities and their global relationships. An important part of those relationships in the fair trade system are farmers and artisans of the Global South. I will now turn to an analysis of how fair trade discourse constructs its Southern producers/trading partners—a construction that, I will argue, necessarily results from the autonomizing location of power just described.

Chapter 6. Depoliticized Constructions of Southern Producers

Anthropologist and business owner Kimberly Grimes says of her fair trade shop, “We not only sell goods, we tell stories—stories about people and cultures around the world” (2000:19). Her statement holds true for the fair trade system more broadly, and the individualized consumer modes of action advocated in this system have effects on the ways those stories are told. One of my major research concerns came out of Esteva’s (1992) discussion of the “invention of underdevelopment,” which led me to ask how producers of the Global South are constructed by the discourse of fair trade? In this chapter, I will demonstrate that by politicizing Northerners through a neo-liberal consumer movement, the fair trade system constructs Southern producers through depoliticized descriptions.

Here’s the Story

Much of the assumption of global injustice discussed in chapter four is wrapped up in the telling of artisans’ stories. While visiting various alternative trade shops and websites, I found specific patterns of presenting information in producers’ stories. At fair trade stores, products are labeled with their country of origin and small display cards often describe the items’ production process and traditional uses. The following are examples from two different fair trade stores:

These beautifully crafted recycled aluminum boxes are made by fair trade artisans in Bali. Traditionally, they were used to bring gifts and offerings to weddings, house warmings and other ceremonies.

Global Mamas is a non-profit assisting small, women-owned businesses in Ghana. Ghana is situated on the Gold Coast of West Africa, where the vast majority of women earn less than \$2 per day. By purchasing this product you are offering sustainable livelihoods to women in Africa. Proceeds go directly to the women entrepreneurs and the nonprofit programs that assist them with business development. Join the community of Global Mamas who care about the world and the future.

Similar story contents can be found on fair trade organization websites. For instance, on the product pages of its website, Ten Thousand Villages displays thumbprint images of items along with the title, location of origin, and price. When the viewer clicks on specific items, she is moved to a page with a larger image of the product, as well as short descriptions like these:

Coiled Raffia Basket

Harvest colors of tan, gold, rust and brown coil around the interior of this raffia basket. The core of each coil is banana fiber, around which raffia palm is wrapped. Made by women artisans, many of whom became widows due to war or their husbands' deaths from AIDS.

Good Fortune Statues

These revered Chinese cultural figures symbolize happiness (man carrying a baby), prosperity (well-groomed elaborately dressed man) and longevity (man with a long beard). Countless stories tell of these characters bestowing kindness on worthy mortals. Ceramic statues are detachable from wood bases.

Farther down on the Ten Thousand Villages product page, the viewer can find a mini-profile of the group that produced the item, as well as links to the other products made by that group. The following profiles correspond to the group that made the coiled raffia basket and the good fortune statues, respectively:



Artisan Group: [Uganda Crafts 2000 Ltd.](#)

Country: Uganda

Uganda Crafts markets crafts for artisans and provides training in quality control, design and marketing. The organization also owns a retail store that provides employment for people with physical disabilities.



Artisan Group: [Craft Link](#)
Country: Vietnam

Craft Link, a nonprofit organization, works with Vietnamese artisans to generate income, with a focus on ethnic minorities, street children and artisans with disabilities.

The idea of telling stories about producers and products suggests that fair trade discourse goes beyond the standard “made in china” label to make visible the relations of production. Sarah Lyon argues, however, that the information provided by fair trade groups about the producers, rather than revealing social relationships of exchange, commodifies difference through essentialized identities. Writing about her research on coffee cooperatives in Guatemala, she remarks, “Roasters market their fair trade coffee through one-dimensional representations of fair trade producers as small farmers, celebrating some kinds of difference while submerging others.” (2006:459).²⁶ In the artisans’ stories at fair trade shops or on FTO websites, details such as “the vast majority of women [in Ghana] earn less than \$2 per day” and declarations that these products generate income for women and minorities construct crafts producers mainly through demographic models—as “impoverished,” “marginalized,” and “disenfranchised.” Like the narratives of change in producer success stories examined in chapter four, these formulaic profiles convey the idea that before fair trade the artisans were disadvantaged, but they do provide any serious context for that situation. These constructions thus inform and re-form the basic assumption of global economic inequality that undergirds the fair trade system.

²⁶ As discussed in chapter three, Varul accepts the premise that fair trade counteracts the hidden nature of social processes determining production viewed by Marx, but says that fair trade accomplishes only partial de-fetishization because it effects a romantic commodification of people and places that relies on notions of distance and authenticity.

Artisans' Stories at MayaWorks

Since MayaWorks does not operate a retail store, the organization does not have a singular physical space to share information on the Guatemalan women with whom it works. Nevertheless, the staff members articulated the task of telling artisans' stories as an important element of the business. They told me that giving volunteers the chance to tell the MayaWorks/artisans' stories²⁷ by hosting sales is an important part of creating transnational connections:

I just think each of them telling MayaWorks' story and just talking about what it does...how they also can tell consumers what to do. It's kind of like this network. They, they feel empowered by that. [Naomi]

Similarly, Pat Krause said, "By participating and doing these things, every time somebody stands up there and sells scrunchies, they're telling the story, and they're becoming more aware themselves."

In contrast to retail stores that source fair trade goods from a variety of FTOs, MayaWorks staff members actually work with the artisans whose products the organization sells. The stories told on the website are correspondingly more in depth than the brief ones that accompany products for sale. According to Jeannie, volunteer sales have declined in recent years while online sales have increased. She said that engaging people with their mission is more challenging outside of the person-to-person format, and that is why they try to keep the website interesting so people will want to read the artisans' stories. One of the goals she mentioned for updating the website was to add more stories.

The "About Our Artisans" section of the MayaWorks website includes three artisan group profiles and one individual artisan profile. The artisan group profiles each begin with a

²⁷ No clear distinction is made between the story of MayaWorks as an institution helping artisans and the stories of individual artisans or groups.

paragraph describing the geographic and social community of the different groups. Each one also describes the production process in greater detail than the product descriptions from retail stores above. For instance, the artisan group in Xetonox developed their skills for more than six months before being able to make the cornhusk dolls they envisioned:

When Maria finally discovered the secret of making beautiful angels, the group's leader triumphantly proclaimed: "We all have the same capability! If one of us can do it, we all can!" With great spirit and perseverance, the women helped one another until all eight members could effortlessly weave the dried leaves into sturdy little dolls and angels.

The profiles also tell how each group began working with MayaWorks. The Agua Caliente and Xetonox groups formed with the help of MayaWorks, whereas the people of Santiago Atitlán began making clerical stoles “in blazing rainbows of primary colors with a diffusion of hues from the unique palette of Guatemalan dyes” by working with Oklahoma priest Stan Rother (“Padre Aplàs”) in the 1970s and joined MayaWorks in 1997.

Although these group profiles provide more detailed information than standard fair trade artisan descriptions, and certainly construct the members with more personality, they nevertheless fail to contextualize the groups’ economic needs in terms of political and historical conditions of the communities. The Santiago Atitlán story, for example, says, “Living among the people, Padre Aplàs witnessed and experienced the overwhelming poverty of his parishioners,” to explain his efforts to develop weaving products that could be marketed locally and internationally. The story concludes with a pitch for their stoles that reiterates this uncritical acknowledgement of poverty:

Each stole sold by MayaWorks means more work for weavers in Santiago Atitlán. More work means more food on the table, more opportunity for children to attend school, better health care, and hope for a more stable life.

The individual artisan profile of Doña Rosa from the Tzanjuyu group gives a personalized version of those generalized constructions of poverty.²⁸ The story describes the young age at which Rosa began to working²⁹, her husband's drinking problem and subsequent unemployment, and the moral and economic support she receives through participation in the MayaWorks weaving group in Tzanjuyu. Although Rosa's husband stopped drinking with the help of a religious group and got a new job, "she is still struggling with expenses for all of her children, primarily the costs of schooling." Like the group profiles, Doña Rosa's story evokes sympathy for a hardworking, "less fortunate" woman, but provides little background as to why poverty and alcoholism are so prevalent in Guatemala, particularly among the Maya.

Conclusion

The producer stories told by fair trade discourse thus differ in the amount of details given about the process of crafts production, how the artisans became involved in the fair trade system, and what specific benefits have resulted. Overall, though, the discourse of this system constructs depoliticized and acontextual identities for its Southern trading partners. This pattern is likely a result of the system's reliance on effective marketing to continue functioning. Fisher (2007) points out the usefulness of portraying indigenous producers in marketing and activism in her analysis of the fair trade system. Accordingly, an organizational goal that a MayaWorks staff member articulated to me was the addition of more artisan stories to the website, since the business's sales increasingly take place online. Depoliticized stories of poor but talented producers serve the purpose of enrolling Northerners in the responsibilities of conscious

²⁸ The profile of Dona Rosa appeared in the winter 2005 MayaWorks newsletter and was featured on the website's "About Our Artisans" page throughout my research. At some point during my revision process, the profile was removed from the website, and short descriptions of five of the artisan groups appeared on the "About Our Artisans" page. Links to the three longer group profiles remain on that page.

²⁹ She began caring for other people's children at age nine. After being treated poorly in these jobs, she began selling weaving for low prices at age 15.

consumerism. Antonius Robben's analysis of the way human rights activists and former *guerrilleros* used emotional stories to construct histories of the Argentine "dirty war" can serve as an analogy to this function of fair trade discourse. Robben recalls a discussion where the father of a disappeared youth told him about the pain he experienced when talking to a colonel who callously told him his son had likely been tortured. Hearing this story, Robbens became unable to analyze the conversation and solicit more details:

I think that the term 'rhetorical seduction' is appropriate here because the repeated telling of the same story has led to a formulation that has proven to be the most moving and therefore most persuasive. The account affected my emotional state to such a degree that I was no longer able to see the discourse behind the conversation. I could not ask further questions but allowed my interlocutor to take me along on the incessant search for his son. [1995:93-94]

Fair trade discourse tries to move and persuade Northerners to purchase products by sharing artisans' stories of traditional crafts production amidst conditions of poverty. The system may thus be partially de-fetishizing commodities (Varul 2008), but it nevertheless depoliticizes the conditions of trade relationships, precluding consumers from asking further questions about structural conditions. As a neo-liberal project, fair trade relies on the subjectivities of Northern consumers motivated by generalized poverty to compel action in favor of the system's functioning. Politicizing and historicizing the poverty experienced by Southern producers, by contrast, might invoke responsibility for change at different levels and demand forms of social action in ways other than through the market.

Chapter 7. Consequences and Conclusions

In the preceding chapters I have analyzed the ways that Northerners and Southerners, as well as power and inequality, are constructed in the discourse of fair trade materials, which are primarily produced in the North for consumers. I supported my analysis with a case study of MayaWorks, a U.S. fair trade organization. I argued that at the foundation of the fair trade system is an acknowledgement of inequality in the global economic system that is made thinkable through a neo-liberal course of action that locates the power for change in the consumption practices of Northerners. Now I will consider how this mode of operation limits thinking about broader transformational possibilities in the dominant trade system. Coming to this conclusion calls for an understanding of Bourdieu's concept of *misrecognition*, which he describes as "the fact of recognizing a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004:272). Misrecognition applies to the understandings of inequality set forth by fair trade discourse, as well as the depoliticized identities of Southern producers that it constructs.

The statement I heard most frequently in explanations of the MayaWorks mission was that Guatemalan markets are saturated:

I think it was originally placemats that they started with. Because the women had this ability but they had no market to sell their products. The market in Guatemala, if you go to Guatemala, it's very saturated. Everybody is selling the same things to the same people, and at some point markets begin to dry up there. So they were already looking for a place that they can expand and find a place to sell their goods. [Jeannie]

The reference to a lack of markets in Guatemala appears in MayaWorks promotional materials as well. For instance, a festively-colored brochure peppered with artisan photos and quotations, as well as product pictures, opens with the following description:

Welcome

MayaWorks interweaves the lives of women in Guatemala and the United States; starting with talented Mayan artisans who need markets for their colorful, high-quality products.

What I did not encounter during my research was an explanation of *why* the market is saturated. When I asked Pat Krause that question directly, she replied, “Because there’s so many producers and not enough buyers...It’s like coal to Newcastle.” Her response is more of a definition of “saturated” than an explanation of the political, economic, and historical context of Guatemalan markets. Deeper questions are left unanswered, such as, why are so many women turning to their traditional weaving skills as a way to make money? Why are there no jobs available for men? In cases where the women are widows, why were their husbands killed, and by whom? And why are Mayan people in particular in such dire financial situations? The discursive acknowledgement of a generalized economic need without an analysis of the structural violence that creates that need constitutes misrecognition.

I am not suggesting that the women of MayaWorks do not understand the Guatemalan economy or the effects of historical violence and racism against the Maya people. Rather, my use of the concept of misrecognition suggests that the fair trade system requires certain truths to be taken for granted in order for the system’s operations to be practicable. This corresponds to Ferguson’s (1994) findings that the development apparatus in Lesotho depoliticizes the problems it addresses as a necessary function of creating its own bureaucratic state power. (Hence, I have adapted the title of my paper from that of his book, *The Anti-Politics Machine*). As Bourdieu puts it, “being born in a social world, we accept a whole range of postulates, axioms, which go without saying and require no inculcating” (272). In the social world of fair trade advocates and consumers, the axioms which go without saying are that some people (Southerners) are poor, and some people (Northerners) can exercise power to change that.

Escobar uses the phrase “regimes of representation” to analyze development. He defines these regimes as “places of encounter where identities are constructed and also where violence is originated, symbolized and managed” (1994:10). He argues that development moves problems from politics and culture to the ‘neutral’ realm of science (45). The representations in fair trade discourse do not exclude people from the picture of economic inequality, but they only identify a lack of income and unfair prices for global goods as the reason for the poverty of Southern producers. Thus, paying better prices in the market (and encouraging others to do so, too) becomes the way for individual Northerners to remedy inequality. Whereas Escobar claims that the forms of power in development discourse act not by humanitarian concern but bureaucratization of social action (53), the forms of power in fair trade discourse act through *autonomization* and marketization of social action.

“Fair trade” as a consumer movement or development tool, then, differs from a political-economic understanding of what constitutes fair trade. The fair trade system and fair trade organizations have a specifically articulated understanding of how economic justice can be approached in their work, but their discourse does not produce ways of thinking about this issue at a structural level. For instance, during a lunch conversation at MayaWorks, I asked the staff members how they defined economic justice³⁰. In their responses, they mentioned various factors involved in a general approach to economic justice. Importantly, they said, this approach should be “integrated” by including capacity-building programs and an emphasis on education. Although they mentioned the unequal distribution of wealth globally and in Guatemala, they did not discuss the responsibility of governments or financial institutions in the picture of economic

³⁰ “Economic justice” is a term that the women used commonly in describing their mission. As one of the women said, “it’s kind of a buzz term around here.”

justice. This omission stands in stark contrast to the enormous emphasis on individual consumer responsibility in fair trade discourse.

In his discussion of coffee production and fair trade, Reichman (2008) provides a specific example of the larger structures of power that are neglected by this discourse. He points out the role that the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) played in regulating coffee prices from 1962 to 1989. The treaty collapsed after the fall of the Soviet Union, when the threat of social revolution among farmers became less eminent. Fair trade coffee grew in popularity immediately after the ICA collapse, and the system instituted the same price floor as the former treaty. “Surprisingly,” Reichman notes, “fair trade’s proponents never mention its functional similarity to the ICA, or the fact that it developed after the international treaty fell apart” (2008:111). Similarly, Mark Moberg (2005) contextualizes the growth of fair trade producer groups among Caribbean banana farmers in shifts toward trade deregulation. After World War II the United Kingdom became the primary destination for Eastern Caribbean bananas through preferential trade agreements. In 1998, though, at the urging of the Chiquita Corporation, U.S. and Latin American governments challenged the U.K.’s tariff-quota system in front of the World Trade Organization. The WTO ruled in favor of the plaintiffs to put an end to the protected markets, and the first fair trade fruit was being labeled as such by 2000.

While some fair trade resources, like DeCarlo’s *Beginner’s Guide*, offer cursory explanations of the harm that free trade policies inflict on global producers, their calls for action remain in the realm of consumption. Economic policies are depicted as having an abstract or confusing influence on trade, whereas power for change is only identified with the individual. The effect of these conditions of possibility (Escobar 1994) is a failure to meet the educational goal described in the Fair Trade Federation’s principles:

Promote fair trade: Fair Trade encourages an understanding by all participants of their role in world trade. Members actively raise awareness about Fair Trade and the possibility of greater justice in the global economic system. They encourage customers and producers to ask questions about conventional and alternative supply chains and to make informed choices. Members demonstrate that trade can be a positive force for improving living standards, health, education, the distribution of power, and the environment in the communities with which they work.

This failure was evident to me not only in fair trade discourse's limited discussion of the problems of the dominant trade and economic system, but also in the many casual conversations I have had wherein I mentioned fair trade research and the people I was talking to called my topic "free trade" without realizing that the latter term refers to a paradigm of a purportedly different ethos. Since fair trade discourse fails to explain economic inequality at a level that goes beyond the price paid by consumers (misrecognition), the discourse cannot construct possibilities that would seek to transform the larger structures in which such inequality is embedded.

Conditioning Different Possibilities

Although fair trade businesses tend to rely on formulaic descriptions of producers and production processes in order to "tell stories" about global goods and global identities, one fair trade shop I visited incorporated an additional element to their store. Maya Essence is a fair trade store in Chicago run by an organization called Casa Guatemala, which the MayaWorks customer service associate Naomi told me began as a political asylum group for refugees from the violence of the 1980s. The Casa Guatemala website describes the group thusly:

Our organization is dedicated to organizing our community so that it may, for itself, secure inherent, basic human rights, which include the right to live any where one chooses, free from fear, ignorance, poverty or repression in a society which turns away and does nothing.

In addition to selling fair trade products (including some from MayaWorks), the Maya Essence store serves as a community space and art gallery. When I visited the store, I found a flyer for an

upcoming “Colombian Human Rights Fiesta” being held at the store, involving a documentary showing, food, music, and dance. The table from which I grabbed that flyer represented a seemingly small yet significant difference in this space as compared to other fair trade shops. In the back section where art hung on display, the table offered informational materials on fair trade, as well as political issues. For instance, I picked up a copy of a national security archives update on a human rights investigation in Guatemala, a quarter sheet about an upcoming End the Occupations march, and a pamphlet labeled *Juventud sin Violencia*, a primer on violence and human rights for youth.

These materials themselves do not constitute a shift from “fair trade” as an anti-politics movement to a radical re-thinking of the global economy and marginalizing political entities; however, they do indicate the possibility for the fair trade system to begin better contextualizing existing inequalities. Certainly the availability of some political information at Maya Essence signifies a different approach from DeCarlo’s previously cited statement, “I am not going to deconstruct history and blame inequality on colonialism or corruption or even capitalism” (2007:5). Other stores could take on this approach by re-politicizing their constructions of Southerners *and* Northerners involved in fair trade. MayaWorks, too could also begin to move away from misrecognition and strengthen the understandings of economic injustice that their volunteers customers can attain by creating a section of their website that describes the history of violence and exclusion faced by Guatemalan Mayas and how that history is reflected in current political, social, and economic conditions. Similarly, the Fair Trade Federation and Fair Trade Resource Network should expand the background materials available on their websites. Their current information and suggested readings focus on the fair trade system itself, with little

explanation or resources for learning about the ills of the dominant trading system that fair trade contests.

The Global Sea of Inequality

To conclude, I return to the “fish don’t know they’re wet” metaphor. Through the autonomized location of power, fair trade discourse strongly conveys the message that Northerners are indeed involved in international trade—that fish are wet. However, in focusing on the role of individual consumers and advocates, the discourse neglects the role of other powerful fish in the sea of global inequality, such as governments and international trade organizations. While the fair trade system has been characterized as both an opposition to globalization (Moberg 2005) and a new form of it (Murray and Raynolds 2007), David Graeber problematizes the idea of “globalization” itself in his arguments about what “real globalization” would mean, which includes free immigration, global rule of law, free movement of knowledge, cultural products and ideas, uniform standards for products and licensing, and market principles in banking. He declares:

The real argument is not between those who are for globalization and those who are against it. It never was. The real argument is not about whether to reduce the barriers; it’s about which barriers to reduce, and how far, and for whose benefit. [2000]

Graeber’s analysis makes demands for structural changes to world political systems in order to ameliorate global economic injustice. Fair trade materials, by contrast, construct Northerners in positions of power to “make a difference” in poverty, but take the existence of poverty in the first place for granted and hence depoliticize the marginality of Southern producers. Understanding the historical and political contexts of poverty calls for an approach to change that tackles problems in multiple power dimensions, but in its depoliticizing construction of poverty and neo-

liberal response, fair trade discourse follows the current of the dominant economic system—
rather than making waves.

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