

Book Reviews

Bacon, Christopher M., V. Ernesto Menendez, Stephen R. Gliessman, David Goodman, and Jonathan A. Fox, eds. 2008. *Confronting the Coffee Crisis: Fair Trade, Sustainable Livelihoods and Ecosystems in Mexico and Central America*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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Coffee is grown almost entirely in the developing world, and mostly by approximately 25 million small-scale producers. From 1989, when the International Coffee Agreement was dismantled, until 2005, the price of coffee nose-dived like never before in its history. Low prices sent producers into a spiral, causing loss of livelihood, out-migration, and environmental destruction from more environmentally intensive activities taking over old coffee producing areas. Mexico and Central America were among the hardest hit, where the coffee crisis occurred alongside the “Washington Consensus” policies in Latin America that also slashed virtually all support of small scale rural farming.

Paradoxically, this crisis coincided with a northern coffee fad. One point five billion cups of coffee are consumed each day in our homes or in the ever-growing Starbucks, Peet’s and other gourmet retail outlets that grow faster than fast-food havens.

Books on fair trade have become a cottage industry, but far too many of them lack a critical analysis and see Northern certification as a panacea for sustainable development. Two of the better volumes are Laura Raynold’s *Fair Trade*,¹ which gives perhaps the most comprehensive overview of the global situation, and Benoit Daviron and Stefano Ponte’s *The Coffee Paradox*,² which looks at fair trade coffee in Africa. The Bacon et al. volume is the first of its kind to look at the Americas and to make environmentally sustainable livelihoods the core dependent variable for analysis.

The book is organized into three parts. The first part describes the overall context of the global coffee crisis and the global commodity chain for coffee in general, and gives an advocate’s account of transnational coalitions that are working with small-scale coffee farmers in an attempt to mitigate the crisis. The second part examines the environmental and social dimensions of how the crisis has impacted various coffee communities in Mexico and Central America. Most of these chapters deploy a participant/observation/action-oriented research methodology that evokes but builds on Robert Chamber’s classic “participatory rural appraisal” methods.³ The final section examines how small-scale

1. Raynolds 2007.

2. Daviron and Ponte 2005.

3. Chambers 1994.

producers in the region have linked with transnational social movements and global markets as part of their survival strategy.

These chapters show that poor coffee farmers exhibited remarkable creativity, capability, and resilience. In response to the crisis, many farmers joined or formed producer cooperatives and other organizations to help build scale and productivity, diversified their technology and product mix (and sometimes thus also the level of biodiversity), and/or networked with transnational coalitions to gain access to the gourmet coffee consumption boom in the North through fair trade and organic certification schemes. Such findings stand in stark contrast to other studies that depict the poor as victims who cannot help themselves and who are in dire need of hand-outs and assistance. Some of the chapters also show that the poor adapted their strategies to be more environmentally friendly on their own, not in response to Northern demand, demonstrating that environmental values do not always originate in the North.

What makes this volume stand out, in its best chapters, is its critical approach. Rather than heralding small-scale production organization and linkages with transnational fair trade and organic certification networks as panaceas, these chapters show that such strategies have more often than not been *strategies of survival* rather than *strategies of success*. Small-scale coffee farmers in Mexico and the Caribbean continue to be highly vulnerable and long-term sustainability of their livelihood is far from certain. One strong chapter, by David Bray and his colleagues, argues that development policies that go well beyond certification and consumer consciousness campaigns will be essential for sustainable development in the region. Coffee markets are rife with market failures, due to highly concentrated retail and buying chains coupled with information and environmental externalities. In the presence of such market failure there is a role for non-market institutions to step in. Thus far, however, the majority of countries studied in this volume have continued their neglect of the rural countryside.

Moreover, the fair trade and organic certification markets are showing strain. Sometimes certification costs and export premiums still fall short of paying for themselves, and the global market potential for such coffee continues to be small and perhaps nearing its limits. Finally, the transnational network for certification shows classic North-South strains of mistrust and conflicting points of interest that have plagued so many other North-South coalitions in global environmental politics.

The volume is essential reading for anyone trying to understand the global coffee crisis, the crisis of neo-liberal economic policy in the Americas, the agroecology of shade-grown coffee, fair trade and organic certification, and the role of the poor in global justice and sustainability movements. While the volume is an immense contribution to the literature, its writing is uneven in places. A more unified volume would have deployed similar research methods and operating definitions across the board. The general conclusions and explanatory power across the studies and beyond Mexico and Central America would have

been even stronger. Such criticism, however, is perhaps too tall an order in a research environment that has limited funding for such a large effort. In the end, it is striking the extent to which the chapters hang together as a whole to give us an in-depth analysis of people, coffee, and the environment in Mexico and the Central America while at the same time enabling us to derive lessons and implications far beyond the Western Hemisphere.

References

- Chambers, Robert. 1994. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): Analysis of Experience. *World Development* 22 (9): 1253–1268.
- Daviron, Benoit, and Stefano Ponte. 2005. *The Coffee Paradox: Global Markets, Commodity Trade and the Elusive Promise of Development*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Raynolds, Laura. 2007. *Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization*. London: Routledge Press.

Oosterveer, Peter. 2007. *Global Governance of Food Production and Consumption: Issues and Challenges*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

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The increasingly globalized system of food production and consumption has its costs and benefits. Those of us living in cold regions can enjoy fresh produce year round, and have access to a dizzying array of exotic foodstuffs at our local supermarkets. But the price of this variety and convenience is that our food now comes from much further away than it did a generation ago, and its route to our markets and kitchens entails far more complex global supply chains than before. As a result, Oosterveer argues in this impressively thorough study, conventional nation-state-based regulatory institutions that have been charged with ensuring the safety of our food are no longer up to the task. This inadequacy in existing institutions of governance is partly due to the complexity of global food provisioning processes. It is also partly due to increasing public skepticism about the role of natural science in conventional risk politics, which supposes that an impartial regime of science-based regulation primarily engaged in testing and inspections can serve the public interest in minimizing risk and safeguarding food supplies. Several high-profile failures of this conventional regime of food governance, including the outbreak of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, or “mad cow disease”) and the ongoing controversy surrounding genetically-modified foods, reveal the limits of this model.

Oosterveer’s project involves both theoretical conceptualization and empirical research, drawing on developments in social theory and utilizing three case studies (on BSE, GM foods, and aquaculture) to analyze several innovative governance arrangements through a conceptual lens. According to conventional risk politics, actors within nation-states treat risk within three distinct scientific