

*J. Lat. Amer. Stud.* 41 (2009). doi:10.1017/S0022216X0800549X

Christopher Bacon, V. Ernesto Méndez, Stephen R. Gliessman, David Goodman, and Jonathan Fox (eds.), *Confronting the Coffee Crisis: Fair Trade, Sustainable Livelihoods, and Ecosystems in Mexico and Central America* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008), pp. xii + 390, £43.95, £17.95 pb.

During the coffee crisis of the late 1990s–early 2000s, historically low world prices brought devastation to coffee-growing communities around the world. This book sets out ‘to explore how producers have responded to the crisis, and to evaluate what difference their “projects” have made in socioeconomic and ecological terms’ (Goodman, p. 4). It is a collaborative effort of researchers from Mexico, Central America, and the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), all with considerable research experience in the region. Specific chapters focus on Mexico, Nicaragua and El Salvador. The book is divided into three sections: introductory material, a section focusing on the sociology and agro-ecology of coffee production, and a section focusing on Fair Trade, certified organic, and other alternative trade channels designed to benefit small coffee growers.

The first section features a chapter by Gliessman on the agro-ecology of coffee farming, rather oddly sandwiched between two chapters on the origins of the coffee crisis. The first of these essays, by Goodman, provides a brief but cogent analysis of the crisis and its larger context – neoliberalism, structural adjustment, consolidation of giant transnational corporations – and introduces the debate over the ‘mainstreaming’ of Fair Trade. The latter essay, by Petchers and Harris, reads more like an Oxfam report than a scholarly article. While it raises many important issues related to the crisis, its analysis is oversimplified and it fixates on proximate causes (such as increased coffee production in Vietnam and Brazil) rather than underlying structural determinants as analysed by Goodman.

The strength of the second section is its integration of ecological, economic and sociological analyses of groups of small coffee growers. The weakness is that much of this research was conducted in the 1990s, before the worst effects of the crisis were felt, so that it doesn’t speak directly to producers’ responses to the crisis (chapters by Méndez and Bacon are exceptions). The best chapters in this section are ones by Martínez-Torres and Westphal. Martínez-Torres argues that both technified production (using high-yielding varieties and lots of chemicals) and organic production are ways of intensifying traditional production methods in order to improve yields and incomes. Organic production does almost as well as chemical-intensive production in income generation, helped by higher prices for organic coffee, and is far superior on agro-ecological measures. There is even some indication that highly skilled organic producers can out-produce the chemical-intensive system.

Westphal’s chapter suggests that ‘diverse coffee agroforestry systems,’ including shade trees, fruit trees and other food crops, may be an optimal adaptation to the conditions faced by small coffee producers in this region. The Sandinistas collectivised coffee production and introduced ‘modern’ technified methods. After the Sandinistas lost power in 1990, the collective farms were divided into small plots and distributed to the individual collective members. Within ten years, these coffee farms had evolved to look very similar to those of ‘historically private producers’ who had retained individual ownership of their small farms throughout the 1980s. These diversified systems provide subsistence for the family as well as foods and wood for sale on local markets to provide income outside the periods of the coffee harvests.

One irony of the chapters in this section is that all use tree species diversity as one measure of the impact of different types of coffee production on the environment. There is no mention of bird species, despite the fact that the impact of technified coffee production on migratory bird species was the critical finding that brought shade-grown coffee into consumers' consciousness in the 1990s. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center's 'Bird Friendly' coffee is mentioned several times in the third section of the book, but not in this section.

The final section of the book assesses the benefits provided to small coffee growers through Fair Trade, organic, and other alternative trade channels. Bray et al emphasise the agency of coffee producers in the creation of these channels in Mexico, the first and largest organic coffee producer, arguing that:

Organic coffee did not emerge because of organic certification criteria, and only partly from finding committed consumers. ... the conversion to organic coffee by small farmers also arose from over a decade of populist agrarian organizing and accompanying organizational innovations' (p. 238).

A fascinating chapter by Mutersbaugh analyses the process of organic certification as it happens on the ground in Oaxaca, showing the inherent contradiction between the Northern culture of formal documentation and verification and the local indigenous concept of the *cargo*, a duty of providing unpaid service to the community. The local communities he studied found a way to resolve this contradiction, but he argues that the extension of this culture of 'institutionalized mistrust' (Bacon et al., p. 356) threatens to undermine not only elements of indigenous culture, but also the social movement ethos underlying organic and Fair Trade channels.

The volume finishes strongly with a concluding chapter by Bacon, Méndez and Fox that pulls together the major themes and issues raised in the book, discusses the many paradoxes involved in trying to use sustainable coffee production as an engine of development, and outlines a longer term, more comprehensive strategy to improve the livelihoods of small coffee growers. This aspect draws on Jaffe and Bacon's penultimate chapter which analyses the formation of the Community Agroecology Network (CAN), in which these two authors, along with several others included in this volume, were centrally involved. CAN is a long-term participatory action research (PAR) project between UCSC and five coffee producing communities in Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Costa Rica, intended to help the producers to better understand the structures of Northern markets and to market their coffees directly to consumers, thereby earning higher returns than through organic or Fair Trade channels.

In these two chapters, the PAR orientation of the authors comes to the fore. They emphasise the power imbalances between Southern producers and Northern conscious consumers, even as 'one of the main imbalances in the world coffee system is between organized producers in the South and the largely individualistic environmentally and socially aware consumers in the North' (Bacon et al., p. 363). We have much to learn from each other, but in true PAR fashion, it will require much harder work on the part of the power-holders to forge relationships of true equality between these parties.

Overall, despite the uneven quality of the different chapters, this is a worthwhile book for anyone interested in agriculture, sustainable development and the survival of small-scale producers in Latin America.

*University of the West Indies, Mona*

JOHN M. TALBOT