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In short, this is a reasonably competent overview history of Mexico for those wanting a “quick read”. However, for geographers, sociologists and political economists who might expect a more informed and nuanced introduction to Mexico, it fails us badly.

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Confronting the Coffee Crisis: Fair Trade, Sustainable Livelihoods, and Ecosystems in Mexico and Central America. Christopher Bacon, V. Ernesto Méndez, Stephen Gliessman, David Goodman, and Jonathan Fox, (eds). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. Pp. xii and 400, 15 illustrations, notes, and index. \$27.00 paper (ISBN 978-0-262-52480-3).

As the lengthy title indicates, this is a very ambitious volume in its analysis of a variety of Mesoamerican responses to the crisis in the global coffee industry precipitated by the collapse in 1989 of the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) and the subsequent decline in prices paid to farmers for their product. This interdisciplinary effort goes far beyond the ramifications of that on-going crisis to study various coffee production systems utilized by the region’s small-scale producers who are the primary focus of the study. In doing so, it also considers a variety of social and environmental factors as well as introducing the many external actors involved in the region’s industry, including NGOs and several organizations that work with alternative trade systems, organic labeling, and fair trade certification. It is important to note, however, that this is not intended to provide an overview of Mesoamerica’s coffee industry; the dominant corporate sector is not analyzed beyond its recent flirtations with several forms of alternative trade.

The multi-dimensionality of the subject material is matched by the diversity of the editors and individual chapter authors. The book, comprised of 14 chapters, has five editors and an additional 12 contributing authors. They represent a mix of disciplines including agro-ecology, social anthropology, plant and soil science, geography, Latin American studies, and environmental studies. Several are/were practitioners with development or government agencies; many of them work in the region. The academic core of the group resides at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Together, they have assembled a book based on an impressive volume of field work, which is one of its greatest strengths. Most of that, however, occurred prior to 2001 leaving the reader to ponder what has transpired since in the several study areas described in individual chapters.

One of the book’s weaknesses is a direct result of the diversity of its authors. The editing is uneven, with some chapters, particularly the first few case studies, more difficult to follow. With five editors, this is not altogether surprising, but the book would have benefited from a more careful final edit by the MIT Press. Otherwise, though, the volume is logically organized. The first three chapters provide the framework underlying the issues researched. Using the ICA collapse as a starting point, Chapter 1 analyzes how that event enabled the greater penetration of globalization processes into the industry in ways that led to a smaller share of the rents going to producers and greater shares to industry operatives in consuming countries. It goes on to chronicle the rise of the alternative trade sector as one means of attempting to counter that trend. The second chapter introduces readers to agro-ecology, a unifying theme of the book, and its application to the analysis of the traditional production and cultural systems that characterize many of the region’s small-scale farmers. Chapter 3 provides a more detailed look at the roots of the crisis, the market glut induced by the rise of Vietnam as a major exporter and the

expansion of Brazilian exports, and the difficulties encountered by small-scale producers as they try to compete with the giants of the industry.

The second section includes six chapters devoted to case studies from selected locales in Mexico, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Collectively, they serve to reinforce the agro-ecology perspective regarding the environmental and cultural benefits of traditional systems. Specifically, shade-grown coffee production systems offer greater conservation benefits as well as the potential for enhancing food supply and opportunities to locally market other farm goods and wood. The case studies also illustrate the contributions of such systems to the maintenance of rural cultures while recognizing their limitations in improving rural incomes. There is much in these chapters that will appeal to Latin Americanist geographers, particularly those with interests in rural development and cultures.

The book's third section of the book includes four chapters that focus on the challenges confronting various alternative trade systems as they work with the small-scale farmers of Mesoamerica. These chapters are notable for their discussions of the roles played by the social fabric of the communities where the small-scale farmers live, how that has facilitated the establishment of linkages with external actors involved in alternative trade, and the unique challenges faced by community members who assume responsibility for implementing the certification processes, the latter described in Chapter 11. The following chapter offers a valuable synopsis of the evolution of alternative trade organizations for those not already familiar with those entities. The word "paradox" appears frequently in this section of the book as the authors describe some of the inherently unequal relationships engendered by the alternative trade movement.

The concluding chapter, written by three of the editors, continues the idea of paradoxes as it offers a realistic and rather sobering assessment of the challenges confronting the farmers and their allies in their efforts to survive while maintaining economically viable and environmentally sustainable systems of coffee production. Those who are anticipating a ringing endorsement of Fair Trade or Organic Certification programs as the savior of small-scale rural systems are likely to be disappointed. One realizes that the primary motivation of most of the farmers involved is income enhancement rather than the loftier goal of conservation for its own sake. In its final analysis, the chapter identifies several impediments to the ultimate success of the organic/fair trade – small-scale farmer linkage and suggests that there is a rising threat of their co-optation by the corporate sector of the industry. Despite all the best intentions, the niche markets for organic or other forms of fair trade coffee hover around two per-cent of the global coffee market, a discouraging outcome after so much effort.

Overall, *Confronting the Coffee Crisis* is a very instructional read for Latin Americanists interested in rural development. It is an important contribution to the literature on alternative trade, particularly through its case studies, which provide the ground level analysis that has largely been lacking up to this point for what is still a relatively recent phenomenon. Several of its chapters are also potentially useful in course lecture development and for assignment to graduate courses. The fact that it is available in affordable paperback form is helpful.

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