

Review by: Feinberg, Richard, Foreign Affairs, 00157120, Sep/Oct2008, Vol. 87, Issue 5

Section: Recent Books on International Relations

Western Hemisphere

Confronting the Coffee Crisis: Fair Trade, Sustainable Livelihoods, and Ecosystems in Mexico and Central America.

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER M. BACON, V. ERNESTO MÉNDEZ,

STEPHEN R. GLIESSMAN, DAVID GOODMAN, AND JONATHAN A. FOX.

MIT Press, 2008, 400 pp. \$27.00.

If you care about who produced the beans used to make your morning coffee and how, this spirited volume will spark your imagination, even if it does not fully clear up all of your concerns. These sociologists and environmentalists, grouped around the University of California, Santa Cruz, and nongovernmental organizations such as Oxfam, find some hope for small-farm cooperatives in the movements promoting quality shade-grown organic and fair-trade coffees. But for these participatory action researchers, a new world of personal relationships between small-scale growers in the South and socially conscious consumers in the North--unmediated by global roasters, distributors, or retailers--emerges as the ultimate Utopian benchmark. The greatest fear among some activists is "selling out to scale up," but the lead editors note that high-standard sustainable coffee production accounts for only a small, albeit growing, portion--still under five percent--of the globally traded harvest. Absent is a rigorous analysis of Starbucks' widely publicized fair-trade initiatives (the essays date back to 2004), and the authors dismiss the merely "symbolic concessions" of other major brands. In his own finely detailed study on Nicaragua, included here, Bacon correctly concludes that "the relationships between price, quality, certification and cooperative membership merit further research."

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By Richard Feinberg