

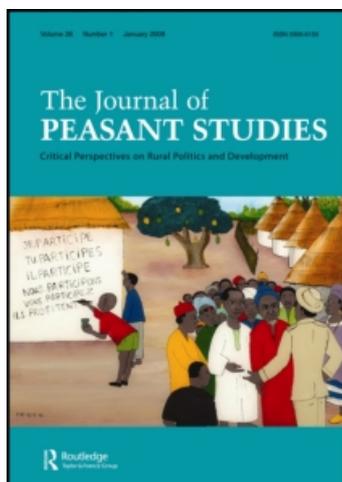
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## Book Reviews

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Gender myths and feminist fables: the struggle for interpretive power in gender and development**, edited by Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, viii + 173 pp., US\$39.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4051-6937-0

*Gender Myths and Feminist Fables* presents a harsh but necessary critique of the manner in which feminist thought has been institutionalised in development discourse and practice. This edited volume grew out of a workshop hosted by the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in 2003. Its prominent authors turn a critical eye toward their own discipline, bringing their many years of experience to bear on the field of gender and development. The resulting book constitutes a trenchant critique of the ways feminist ideas are often simplified, essentialised, or distorted when incorporated into development practice.

Using the organising concept of the ‘gender myth’, the authors challenge simplified representations of women as naturally peaceful or incorruptible and depictions of marriage as a site of unmitigated patriarchy and conflict. In confronting these myths, they take aim not only at such frequent offenders as the World Bank but also at feminist researchers and activists, including the authors themselves. The book thus exposes the link between knowledge and power by troubling the prevailing conceptions of women in development discourse and exposing their roots in feminist thought. The authors question why certain representations of women have become prevalent while others have been excluded. They probe the interests that are served by certain types of feminist knowledge. They also warn of the negative consequences that such mythic portrayals may have in the actual lives of the women affected by development policies.

After a useful introductory chapter by the editors, the following seven chapters each examine a different gender myth, its origins and its consequences.

In Chapter Two, Bridget O’Laughlin tackles the appealing myth that decreasing gender inequality in the allocation of productive resources will lead to poverty reduction via greater overall household efficiency. According to this myth, if resources like inputs, credit, and land were not controlled disproportionately by men, the efficiency of rural households would be increased, leading to greater productivity and higher earnings. Through an analysis of two of the myth’s foundational documents, O’Laughlin shows that it is based on neoclassical economic assumptions. As a result, she argues, the myth privileges individual interests while ignoring the complex realities of intra-household cooperation and collectively held land. The myth therefore gives rise to solutions, which emphasise individualisation and continued market penetration (e.g. micro-credit and individual land titles for women). O’Laughlin concludes that the myth and the rationale it provides for increased commodification carry a greater threat of increased insecurity than they do promise of poverty reduction.

In the third chapter, Mercedes González de la Rocha argues against the ‘myth of survival’, which holds that poor households will always find ways to survive even in the face of macroeconomic policies that reduce the employment options and resources available to them. González de la Rocha has a particular interest in debunking this myth because it is based in part on the findings of her own research on how Mexican households survived the 1980s economic crisis. They did so, she found, through creative strategies that involved combining diverse incomes and drawing on non-monetary assets such as social networks. She suggests, however, that development practitioners have since spun these findings to mythic proportions and have even been unreceptive to her recent work, which calls them into question. She concludes that the myth of survival is potentially hazardous to the poor, and particularly to poor women, as it serves as a justification for economic policies that act to their continued detriment, assuming that they will find a way to survive without taking into account their severely eroded asset base.

In Chapter Five, Anne Marie Goetz explores the idea that women are inherently less susceptible to corruption in political office than men, a myth which has been eagerly adopted by the World Bank and other development agencies. Goetz demonstrates that the myth is simply the mirror opposite of an earlier myth (propagated by the likes of Plato and Rousseau) according to which women were unfit for public office because their grounding in the private sphere made them incapable of the rational, unemotional thought it required. The new myth reverses these beliefs, painting women’s supposedly universal nurturing skills as the source of a more moral approach to politics. Goetz’s own analysis is that, rather than being inherently predisposed against corruption, women simply lack opportunities for corruption. Drawing on her previous research in South Asia, Goetz shows how a political system dominated by masculine social networks and the fear of sexual harassment may be the root cause of *both* women’s limited political participation and their lack of opportunity to engage in corrupt behaviour.

In Chapter Six, Cecile Jackson tackles two intertwined myths. She begins with the myth that women are more risk averse than men but in the process also assails the perception of marriage as an inherently oppressive social relation for women. According to Jackson, the idea that women are less likely to take economic risks is informed by the assumption that they have less insurance to rely on in the case of failure. She argues that this assessment ignores the wealth of informal ‘insurance’ available to women in the form of social relations, foremost amongst which is marriage. Using examples from Zimbabwe and Zambia, Jackson demonstrates how marriage acts as a mediating factor that may influence women’s risk decisions in either direction. Women may be more or less likely to take economic risks depending on their husband’s ability to provide insurance and on the specific nature of their conjugal contract. She further points out that women do often retain agency in marriage and that it is possible to take the disaggregation of the household too far. She argues that these myths must be corrected lest women be seen as too risk averse to benefit from development assistance aimed at fostering entrepreneurialism and the adoption of new technology.

This book is a welcome and well-timed contribution to the literature on gender and development. It will be useful to feminist scholars, development policy practitioners, and as a teaching tool for conveying the complex interplay between gender and development. It should be noted that several of the arguments it contains

have already been well documented elsewhere, such as Melissa Leach's chapter on ecofeminism (Chapter Four) and Andrea Cornwall's discussion of female solidarity (Chapter Eight). Some readers might also be disappointed by the book's lack of original empirical research. Most of the authors re-examine their previous work through the conceptual lens of the myth in question. However, this source of weakness is also what makes the book so powerful. Most of the authors write with an unusual and refreshing level of self-reflexivity. It is precisely because they have so much previous experience researching and practicing in the field of gender and development that their critique is so salient. The authors' lives and work are intimately intertwined with the feminist and development communities they criticise. From the standpoint this gives them, they are able to combine a sympathetic understanding of the strategic motives that often lie behind the invocation of feminist myths with a demand to do better. They issue a powerful challenge to themselves and their colleagues to move beyond gender myths to a more fully contextualised and relational understanding of gender and development.

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**Accountability politics: power and voice in rural Mexico**, by Jonathan Fox, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, xi + 438 pp., US\$110 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-920885-2

Increasingly accountability is emerging as one of the latest buzz words in both development and democracy circles. In the development context, the argument is that through greater accountability, 'leaky pipes' of corruption and inefficiency will be repaired, aid will be channelled more effectively to those for whom it is intended, and in turn development initiatives will produce greater and more visible results. For scholars and practitioners of democracy, there is a somewhat similar argument – that following the wave of democratisation of the last century, the challenge now is for democracy to 'deliver the goods', especially in terms of material outcomes, and that creating new forms of democratic accountability can help to do so. Increasingly in this view, accountability is seen as the 'silver bullet' for meeting a results-based agenda, rather than as a set of relationships between citizens and states which is important in its own right as both a precondition and an outcome of democracy.

This work by Jonathan Fox challenges the apolitical, results-based view of accountability and in so doing offers important insights for scholars, policy makers, and practitioners who are concerned about these debates. The book is, in fact, a compilation of essays growing from Fox's insightful work on state-society relationships in Mexico over the last two decades, which now have been woven together into a single volume. As such, the chapters cover a range of topics about which Fox has written – how civil society 'thickens' in authoritarian environments, the relationship of electoral and society-based politics, the capacity of 'invited spaces' to empower, the relationship between reform from above and below, and the importance of alliances across those working within and outside the state. For those of us who have followed Fox's work, it is quite valuable to have these all in a single

volume. I recently handed it to a student interested in exploring the field of state–society relations with the instruction, ‘read this – all of it!’

But what is new about this work, and what is so very timely, is how Fox uses accountability politics as an overall conceptual lens and connective thread to his work, and how in new chapters he draws lessons from his previous work for current debates. He defines accountability politics broadly as ‘the arena of conflict over whether and how those in power are held publicly responsible for their decisions’ (pp. 1–2), and in so doing quickly links it to politics and democracy. In unpacking this definition, a number of further themes emerge.

First, accountability politics are not only a set of institutional mechanisms, or a checklist of procedures, but are the lens through which one can examine the broader terrain of power and the role of citizen voice, protest, and action in state reform. Accountability politics are mediated by formal institutions but not determined by them. They are an arena of contestation, not only a tool for efficiency and effectiveness.

Secondly, and related to the first theme, accountability is deeply linked with participation and transparency, whereas in current debates and practices, these concepts often remain in separate silos. For instance, one set of strategies, literatures, and actors focuses on how citizens participate *upstream* in public policies and debates, through articulating their preferences or demands in processes of participatory governance or through social action from below. Another approach focuses on accountability more *downstream* in the policy process, through such strategies as monitoring of budgets and the implementation of policies after they have been made. Other work focuses on transparency – e.g., on making information available to publics or what Fox calls ‘sunshine’ – paying relatively little attention to whether or how information can be used to challenge power and effect action. Rather than see these as separate strategies, Fox reminds us that ‘transparency, accountability, and participation reforms need each other, they can be mutually reinforcing – but that such synergy remains exceedingly rare’ (p. 354).

Thirdly, Fox challenges our pre-conceptions about where and how accountability is brought about, by linking debates about vertical and horizontal accountability and top-down or bottom-up change. Accountability agents – e.g., those who can help to create change – are located in states *and* in societies, *as well as* in their spaces of interaction; and at local, national, and international levels. Effective accountability strategies need both to scale up vertically, as well as scale out across state and civil society divides. Success is found not in any one approach, but in their interaction. As Fox summarises, ‘At the most general level, the main analytical finding is that changes in the balance of power between society and the state in the countryside were driven by long-term cycles of reciprocal interaction between scaled-up grassroots organisations and institutional innovators – sometimes based elsewhere in civil society, sometimes within the state’ (p. 333). In his view, competitive electoral politics at the national level has yet to become a driving force for accountability, a finding which reinforces the argument that substantive democratic politics is driven by more than voting and party politics, but also involves broader shifts in state–society power.

While the book makes a very important contribution to the growing classics on democratic accountability, it is strangely silent on two broad points. First, other than a chapter that focuses on a campaign to hold the World Bank accountable to its own participation discourse, the book does not look in-depth at the broader role of

international donors in promoting the accountability agenda. While this is partially explained by the fact that Mexico is not an aid-dependent country, there are important lessons in this work for other countries about the limits of a donor-driven accountability agenda, if it does not connect with and support grassroots societal demands.

Secondly, Fox does not delve very deeply into the debates on corporate accountability, nor on how state–society accountability politics are affected by and interact with the market and the private sector. In the case of Mexico, where NAFTA and other regional and international trade agreements are clearly affecting broader distributions of power, and indeed challenging the fundamental ability of the state to be held to account by its national citizenry, one would expect this to be an important discussion. (In a footnote, to be fair, Fox points us to his other relevant work on these issues.)

However, the current economic crisis has brought into focus more than ever the necessity of linking debates on state–society accountabilities to markets and financial institutions, as it has highlighted the failure of states by themselves to regulate the private sector institutions, or to cushion the social impacts when they go wrong. If accountability politics is ‘the arena of conflict over whether and how those in power are held publicly responsible for their decisions’, then it must extend to how states and societies hold global market and financial power to account as well. Perhaps Fox’s next volume can take up this challenge.

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**Peasants and globalization. Political economy, rural transformation and the agrarian question**, edited by A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal Kay, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, 347 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-41-544629-7

Over the past decade, land and agriculture have once again become key topics of development research and policy. However, a good part of this research lacked historical and theoretical depth. *Peasants and Globalization* is thus a very timely book, as it puts issues such as land privatisation, the emergence of capitalist farmers, the restructuring of agricultural production and food regimes, the global fragmentation of labour, and the recent rise of agribusiness within the broader historical context of uneven capitalist development. Moreover, it does so through the analytical lens of the ‘agrarian question’, which has been used to understand the economic, social, and political consequences of the capitalist transformation of agriculture. Even though all the authors ground their work in Marxist analysis, the book is far from voicing a single perspective. Here is where one of the most outstanding aspects of the book lies. It is rich in meticulous assessments and critiques of the work of other scholars, as well as in strong disagreements between the contributors. But being an intra-paradigm exercise could also be said to be a limitation, as the book does not sufficiently integrate issues of ethnicity, gender, culture, discourse, and representation into the ‘classic’ agrarian question.

The book is organised into two sections: the first takes a historical perspective and the second is made up of contemporary cases. These sections are preceded and

followed by chapters in which the editors provide the necessary theoretical background and bring the divergent views together into a coherent debate. In the introductory chapter, the editors take us back to the theoretical roots of the agrarian question as theorised by Marx, Engels, Kautsky, and Lenin. Surveying these classics is extremely useful, if only to introduce these authors to a new generation of scholars of agrarian issues.

The section on historical perspectives opens with one chapter by Ellen Wood and one by Terence Byres that clearly adopt a national and European perspective. Wood's intervention is built on a comparison between the English transition to capitalism and France's absence of transition. Her important and influential argument, which she has presented elsewhere, is that the development of capitalism is unthinkable without a radical transformation of social property relations that has, at its core, the separation of peasants from the land and the rise of absolute private property. This transformation turns the market (or accumulation) into an imperative.

The global dimensions of the agrarian transitions in Europe and their relation to contemporary processes only really come to the fore with Amiya Kumar Bagchi's and Farshad Araghi's contributions, both of which are excellent. Through a theoretically sophisticated argument, Araghi draws attention to the global political aspect of the agrarian question and emphasises the linkages between the reproduction of the reserve army of labour in the West and agrarian transitions and food production in the South. By situating five centuries of agrarian, agricultural, and food policies within the geopolitics of the reproduction of capital, Araghi convincingly demonstrates that the expansion of capitalism has implied a general tendency toward dispossession and depeasantisation, yet has also generated peasantisation in particular regions. What distinguishes the current phase of the agrarian transition, however, is a quasi-universal tendency toward dispossession in the context of global overproduction, and a forced under-consumption among the labouring classes in the South.

The next three chapters put forward well-supported and very provocative claims: Miguel Teubal focuses on the merely extractive nature of the new agriculture; Ray Kiely examines the 'Warrenite' undertone found in work advocating for export-oriented industrialisation; and Bridget O'Laughlin analyses how private property rights for women, promoted in the name of gender equality, generate problems for the livelihoods of peasant families.

In Chapter 9, Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Cristóbal Kay, and Saturnino Borrás assess three decades of neoliberal agrarian restructuring in the global South. They argue that the objective of neoliberal agrarian restructuring is 'to widen [the scope of capitalist social property relations] by broadening and deepening the sway of capitalist social property relations into areas of social, cultural, political, and economic life that have yet to be fully commodified, exposing an even greater number of people to the market imperative' (p. 218). The recent market-led agrarian reforms, the struggles against new forms of enclosures, and the control of the seeds by transnational corporations and of food production by global supermarket chains are all brilliantly analysed as processes exemplifying this tendency.

The readers are introduced to the most recent debates around Henry Bernstein's argument that the agrarian question has been resolved by capital at the global level and that the only remaining question now is about labour. Most authors would not

disagree with the latter part of the analysis. However, many scholars, among them the editors of the book, Araghi, Watts, and McMichael, rightfully take issue with Bernstein's strict understanding of the agrarian question of capital. They argue that there are still many crucial battles for capital in the countryside, such as private property rights, commoditisation of collective resources, control of seeds, ways of producing food, etc. For Philip McMichael, for instance, the new agrarian question is now centred on food. He argues that because 'food is a touchstone for a potentially far more profound political intervention to transcend the depeasantization scenario embedded in the development narrative...the food sovereignty movement at large embodies a strategic transformation of political institutions based on a global moral economy' (p. 305). By putting the emphasis on the politicisation of food and agricultural production through the analysis of the political discourse of the global peasant movement, more than any other contributor, McMichael seeks to transcend the parameters of the classic agrarian question.

An analysis of the current global state of the agrarian question would not be complete without at least a reference to the 'China effect' on the rest of the world. Among many other things, this is what the editors do in a section of their conclusion. Underscoring the peculiarity of China's rapid industrialisation, Akram-Lodhi and Kay contend that China represents one of the main 'outliers' of the global tendency studied in the book. Capitalist accumulation in China is currently not dependent on agrarian accumulation within its borders, but through the import of food it is instead fuelling global agrarian accumulation and contributing to processes of primitive accumulation and dispossession in other countries of the South. This case serves as a reminder that the examination of processes of agrarian changes should be context-specific.

*Peasants and Globalization* is a must for anyone looking for a theoretically sophisticated, historically informed and comparative perspective on agrarian changes under neoliberal globalisation. It has the potential to raise a discussion on the relevance of revisited classic theories to our deeper understanding of contemporary processes.

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**The new peasantries. Struggles for autonomy and sustainability in an era of empire and globalization**, by Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg, London and Sterling, VA, Earthscan, 2008, 356 pp., US\$96.43 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84407-558-4

In *The New Peasantries*, Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg draws upon more than 30 years of empirical research carried out in Peru, Italy, and the Netherlands to analyse the contradictory dynamics that are shaping three different types of farming throughout the world: peasant farming, entrepreneurial farming, and corporate capitalist farming. According to Van der Ploeg, corporate capitalist agriculture is the epitome of 'Empire', whereas the peasant way of farming is characterised by a specific work ethic and a desire to maintain autonomy from the market and to develop a

self-controlled resource-base, which implies the creation 'of as much value added as possible' (p. 42) in adverse environments. In contrast to the subsistence-oriented ethic of peasant farming, the entrepreneurial farm is geared toward the realisation of profits. It is deeply embedded in the market economy, both purchasing inputs and selling output. Van der Ploeg insists that a significant part of the value created by entrepreneurial farmers is being appropriated by other actors in the system: banks, seed suppliers, or machinery companies, which tend to be transnational corporations that are increasingly vertically and horizontally integrated. The notion of Empire is used by Van der Ploeg to describe a particular way of combining resources and of appropriating value, an organisational strategy that is typical of globalised capitalist corporations.

The author identifies three contradictory processes that are shaping farming around the globe. These are (1) the industrialisation of agriculture; (2) the deactivation of farms, that is the gradual decline or abandonment of agricultural production in a certain region; and (3) the process of repeasantisation that occurs as new farms are created by people that were not originally active in the agricultural sector, or as entrepreneurial farmers decide to turn – or return – to peasant ways of farming. These processes are neither linear nor uniform throughout time and space, nor are they, according to Van Der Ploeg, inevitable. He maintains that empirical and situated studies are necessary to understand the contradictory tendencies that affect agriculture and food production. In the rest of the book, he rises to his challenge.

In a chapter on Peru, Van der Ploeg takes us on a journey in the Piura Valley. With the help of longitudinal data, he richly portrays the evolution of agricultural practices in the region over time, from *haciendas* to cooperative farming and, ultimately, to Empire. He argues that the peasant way of farming creates more employment and supports more people per hectare of arable land than the other farming types. In the same chapter, Van der Ploeg describes the strategies developed by the local peasantry in order to face the adverse market conditions that have prevailed in the region since the end of the 1980s. The chapter also describes how, in the Chira and Piura valleys, Empire has established itself while displacing peasants or turning them into salaried workers.

The following chapter presents the Italian dairy conglomerate Parmalat as an example *par excellence* of Empire. Empirical data and informative figures demonstrate how value is appropriated, but never produced, by Empire itself. It also shows that Empire is a frail giant. Indeed, the expansion of Parmalat was fuelled and built essentially on the trust that investors had put in the company's promised profits. When they realised the company had gathered (and concealed) an astronomic debt that was more than its value, they withdrew, causing Parmalat to go into bankruptcy in December 2003. In Italy, the resulting crash was dubbed the 'Parmacrac'. This chapter also explains how Parmalat altered the very idea of fresh food when it created the *latte fresco blu*, or 'fresh blue milk', in 2002. This milk is the result of a delocalised process that can last as long as ten days and during which fresh milk is first separated from cream, thus skimmed, thermally treated, micro-filtered, and then rebuilt with the reincorporation of cream that has previously been pasteurised and homogenised in order to maintain its durability. Under pressure of a lobby in favour of the Parmalat project, the Italian law that defines the conditions under which milk can be presented to consumers as a fresh product had been modified in order that *latte fresco blu* could be sold as such. After the crash, the law

was changed again; fresh milk is now clearly distinguishable from reconstituted milk. This episode exemplifies how Empire can affect the way nature and food are defined. 'Non food' (in this case, 'fresh' milk that actually was the result of the recombination of treated ingredients coming from different countries) coming from 'non places' are two concepts introduced by Van der Ploeg in this chapter that represent a catchy yet effective way of describing the results of the delocalisation and globalisation of agro-food chains.

Chapter five is dedicated to a comparison between the peasant and entrepreneurial modes of farming in Europe. Data from Italy and the Netherlands are used to illustrate value creation processes and moral economies that differentiate the peasant and entrepreneurial worlds. Van der Ploeg suggests that repeasantisation appears as a tendency in certain regions where entrepreneurial farming is 'squeezed' as a result of the increasing difficulty of producing enough to insure margins of profits that will be sufficient to repay debts while average prices are constantly falling. This process of repeasantisation, particularly as it relates to questions of rural development, is discussed in greater depth in the following chapter.

Empire is again the subject of chapter eight, which discusses how scientific management structures the conditions under which peasants and entrepreneurial farmers must work. Van der Ploeg explains how general rules, generated by expert-knowledge, lead to standardisation, virtual management, counterproductive decisions, and the degradation of conditions of production and the environment. The management of hedgerows in the Netherlands and the creation of a 'global cow' are the cases presented here. The next chapter identifies the structural characteristics of 'imperial networks' (expansion, hierarchy, order) and then proceeds to describe how, in the agro-food sector, these principles apply. It contains a discussion about international food regimes: Van der Ploeg suggests that the actual regime could be identified as an imperial regime, based on free trade *and* international regulation. The chapter ends with the author's suggestion that the notion of value should be the object of more theoretical discussion. The last chapter is dedicated to describing the strategies that have been put forward by the peasantry to survive, as the title of the book mentions, 'in an era of Empire and globalisation'.

In summary, Van der Ploeg challenges predictions about the demise of the peasantry and portrayals of peasants as passive victims of the capitalist economy or the elites to whom they are subordinate. Instead, he describes an expanding peasantry (with some 1.2 billion persons worldwide), made up of innovative actors who represent one of the most viable forms of resistance to Empire. In Quebec, where I am writing this review, agricultural producers never referred to themselves as 'peasants' until the foundation, in 2001, of a new organisation called *l'Union paysanne* (the Peasant Union), which was created in reaction to the expansion of the industrial agro-food model. This might be indicative of a process of repeasantisation and resistance to Empire. Van der Ploeg's book will certainly be of help in the coming years, in order to scrutinise the ways agricultural production, circulation, and consumption of agro-food products will evolve here (in Quebec) and elsewhere in the world.

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**On coffee**

**The coffee paradox: global markets, commodity trade and the elusive promise of development**, by Benoit Daviron and Stefano Ponte, London and New York, Zed Books, 2005, xxiv + 288 pp., US\$32 (paperback), ISBN 1-84277-456-5

In *The Coffee Paradox*, Daviron and Ponte use a global value chain and conventions theory approach to explore how changing agro-food governance regimes and coffee qualities relate to who captures the coffee dollar. This volume will be remembered for how the authors integrate sociology, economics, and a little human geography to make a major contribution to the overlapping fields of commodity and development studies. Their exhaustive literature review is grounded through two interconnected case studies about (1) East African coffee production, changing markets in the USA and Italy, and the specific Uganda-to-Italy chain for Robusta coffee, as well as (2) the Tanzania-to-US chain for Arabica coffee. Although, as they admit, conventions theory is plagued by complicated language and inconsistencies, they find a relatively clear map through it and arrive at three attributes of quality to explain how firms create and capture value along the value chain. The authors use this quality trio, which consists of product quality (e.g. size, physical defects, colour, and taste), symbolic quality (e.g. trademarks, brands, and certifications) and in-person service quality (e.g. the way the barista makes and serves your latte), together with an analysis of the uneven power dynamics in the value chain to unpack the relationships connecting value added, standards, and price.

The coffee paradox asks how rock-bottom coffee commodity prices and chronic poverty for Southern producers can co-exist with a coffee renaissance (or latte Revolution) among coffee roasters and consumers in the Global North. The authors claim that stakeholders will need to understand this if they hope to identify successful strategies for smallholders to upgrade within the coffee value chain and capture a *fairer* share of the profits (Gibbon and Ponte 2005). This rich-consumers/poor-producers dichotomy has accompanied tropical commodity production and trade for much of the last century. The difference here is that the rise of specialty coffee markets in particular, and the 'quality turn' in agro-food systems in general (Goodman 2003), claim to represent a break from the high-volume, low-price industrial quality conventions that have put Folgers and Maxwell House onto supermarket shelves and left smallholder producers and rural workers in chronic economic poverty. In contrast, the specialty coffee industry claims to create a *different* value chain focused on quality and sustainability. A lasting solution to the coffee paradox begins with the study of the political economic processes that led to the current problems.

Ponte and Daviron use their in-depth empirical analysis of changing standards and physical coffee qualities to show how many roasters and retailers used the bait and switch. After using decent quality coffee and investing millions in marketing to build the symbolic qualities of their product, many roasters altered the blends behind their brands, replacing the higher quality – and more costly – Arabica coffees with the low cost and less flavourful Robusta beans (p. 144). The deregulation and power shift towards the Northern end of the coffee value chain enabled this switch from physical quality to symbolic qualities and generated higher profits for roasters and retailers. Thankfully, Ponte and Daviron avoid the trap of missing one of the dominant trends in the coffee industry today and thoroughly investigate the

exponential rise of the specialty coffee market in the USA, which claims to be a major exception to this downward trend in coffee quality. Here they provide evidence that clarifies several possible misconceptions about the specialty coffee industry and sustainability certifications. First, there is a lot more value added in specialty coffee – especially since a pound of specialty coffee can sell for \$12 compared to about \$3 for a pound of commercial grade bulk coffee. Secondly, higher quality coffee does not necessarily result in better prices paid to producers. Finally, coffee does not necessarily need to meet higher physical standards to be marketed as higher quality specialty coffee. That being said, specialty roasters generally pay prices that are (slightly) above those paid by the more commercial bulk coffees. However, they often deliver a smaller percent of the coffee dollar to the producer.

These empirical changes are explained by the claim that the creation of symbolic coffee quality adds more value than actual investments that assure the physical qualities. Northern roasters and retailers use advertisers to create symbolic value through their branding and trademarks. However, there are ‘other’ symbolic qualities rooted in civic conventions concerning issues of social justice, ecology, and place. They interpret the proliferation of sustainability certifications, including certified Organic, Fair Trade, and Rainforest Alliance, to be examples of these more civic qualities.

Ponte and Daviron’s study of eco-labels shows that during the period of low commodity prices, smallholder cooperatives received significantly higher prices for sales to Fair Trade channels relative to those paid through sales into conventional markets. In a side-by-side comparison with other sustainable coffee certification programs such as Rainforest Alliance and Utz Certified, they also argue that the organic and Fair Trade certifications deliver a better value to smallholders. Several useful comparative data tables document the percentage of retail price captured at different steps in the value chain. Despite the differences among these certified trade channels, the authors’ broad review of alternative agro-food networks finds sparse evidence regarding their ability to re-distribute value to farmers and substantially change the rural development paradigm.

Ponte and Daviron have the courage to propose several eclectic solutions to the coffee paradox. Their solutions suggest that smallholders and their allies need to build the symbolic qualities to capture more of the retail coffee dollar. Several public, market-based, and hybrid solutions include developing a sustainable coffee fund (good idea), and the promotion of higher standard sustainable certifications such as Fair Trade and organic coffee along with stronger public oversight to investigate the claims these labels make (another good idea). However, they see more potential in a state-regulated, WTO-approved system to register indications of geographic origin, such as those used by French Wines, Darjeeling Tea, and Parmigiano cheese. The combination of these higher-end sustainability certifications and geographic indications could capture additional symbolic value for rural communities and producers. These strategies are tangible steps intended to begin re-balancing South–North trade inequalities. Yet, as Ponte and Daviron indirectly note early in the book, ‘selling a place’ brings a host of future problems and no guarantees of inclusive development should it prove effective.

While these solutions to upgrade might prove effective within the current confines of the value chain, alone they are not commensurate with the challenge of delivering upon ‘the elusive promise of development’. Readers with a deep interest in sustainable rural development should complement this volume with other studies

that engage the rural development, livelihood, and environmental change processes in coffee growing communities. Policymakers may also seek studies that analyse the possibility of a renewed international coffee agreement. This wider agenda opens a search for solutions that address farmer livelihoods, agro-ecological diversification, peasant economies, the voice of Southern social movements, and the role of Southern states in agriculture and rural development. A selection from Ponte *et al.*'s subsequent work appears to move in the later direction (Bolwig *et al.* 2008). But no book can cover everything and this one already covers an ambitious agenda.

In summary, *The Coffee Paradox* is part of the authors' important contribution towards rethinking trade and development studies with a stronger focus on value chains, governance, and quality standards. Ponte and Daviron pick up the dominant trends in the coffee industry and adeptly use value chain analyses to explain the power dynamics and processes behind the industry's current configuration. They do this with a committed eye toward identifying opportunities for smallholders to upgrade within the value chain. This book contains several of the next steps in sustainable coffee and I actively recommend it to development professionals, undergraduates, graduates, and sophisticated coffee drinkers alike.

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**Confronting the coffee crisis: fair trade, sustainable livelihoods and ecosystems in Mexico and in Central America**, edited by Christopher M. Bacon, V. Ernesto Méndez, Stephen R. Gliessman, David Goodman and Jonathan A. Fox, Boston, MA, MIT Press, 2008, xii + 390 pp., US\$27 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-262-52480-3

From 1999 through 2003, the price of a pound of green coffee fell from US\$1.20 to between US\$0.45 and US\$0.65, giving rise to an unparalleled and profound crisis in coffee growing communities worldwide. While coffee prices have since rebounded to an average of \$1.00/pound, the impacts of the plummeting prices and the pre-existing chronic poverty continue to shape the daily lives of millions of small coffee farmers. Furthermore, the inherent volatility of the coffee market has not been eliminated; therefore, it is likely that coffee-growing communities will face similar crises in the years to come. As the volume's editors point out in their conclusion, the public awareness surrounding the coffee crisis creates a 'teachable moment' as the attention opens windows into the uneven power relationships within the global coffee industry and encourages a closer look at social and ecological relationships in coffee-producing regions.

*Confronting the Coffee Crisis* presents readers with a clear overview of the recent crisis and provides insight into the historical evolution of the coffee market that precipitated it. The volume's chapters (which include both previously published pieces and original material) provide a global view of the structural conditions and power relationships shaping the contemporary coffee market, a nuanced look at the variability of production systems in Mexico and Central America, and a critical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the organic, shade grown, and fair trade certification systems that have emerged in recent years to help small farmers weather the notoriously volatile coffee market and protect biodiversity in the region. The volume is a strong addition to existing studies of the international coffee market and its links to livelihoods and ecosystems. In addition, the interdisciplinary approach, which combines case studies written by both scholars and development practitioners, broadens our understanding of rural development initiatives in the region.

The book is organised according to several broad themes. The volume's first section provides a context and analytical framework for the remainder of the book. It includes an especially concise and insightful analysis of the roots of the coffee crisis written by Seth Petchers and Shayna Harris, the directors of Oxfam America's Coffee Program. The second section, Ecological and Social Dimensions of Producers' Responses, explores the coffee crisis through the lens of coffee growing communities' responses to the coffee crisis. These chapters collectively address a central question of the book: have memberships in producer organisations and participation in the certified fair trade, organic, and shade grown coffee markets significantly benefited small coffee farmers by reducing their vulnerability to market downturns, enhancing livelihood opportunities, and furthering conservation goals through the adoption of sustainable production methods? Together, the case studies in this section demonstrate the critical point that the answer to this question is variable and dependent upon a number of critical factors, such as legacies of collective action, features of regional landscapes and ecosystems, and local histories of shifting coffee cultivation methods. An especially strong contribution to this section is Christopher Bacon's chapter, which employs a livelihood vulnerability framework to analyse comparative data demonstrating that Nicaraguan cooperatives participating in certified markets are significantly less vulnerable to low coffee prices than cooperatives that exclusively sell their coffee through conventional market channels. Readers with a specific interest in Latin America will especially appreciate the ways in which these collected case studies highlight the regional diversity in production systems and livelihoods, revealed, for example, in a comparison of Méndez's research in El Salvador and Westphal's in Nicaragua.

The third section, Alternative South–North Networks and Markets, analyses the institutional structures, regulatory procedures, and management systems established to certify specialty coffees. These chapters trace the complex chain of processes that are responsible for transforming the coffee cherries growing on producers' trees across Central America and Mexico into the brewed coffee filling the cups of Northern consumers. Unlike many recent volumes on the international coffee market, *Confronting the Coffee Crisis* broadens the analytical focus beyond a discussion of the impact of fair trade to include empirical research on the impacts of organic and shade grown certification systems as well. The current export capacity of certified fair trade growers worldwide is seven times that of fair trade sales (Murray *et al.* 2003). Therefore, this is an absolutely critical contribution of the

volume as it is becoming increasingly clear that fair trade certification cannot be a singular solution for the millions of small coffee farmers struggling to maintain their livelihoods amidst the ongoing unfavourable market relations. Several of the chapters in this section examine a point of tension that has emerged in certified coffee markets in recent years: is it possible to reconcile the alternative, oppositional ethos of the social movements that gave rise to the fair trade, organic, and shade grown certification systems with the opportunities for market growth offered by mainstreaming, or the adoption of these certified products by larger trading companies, roasters, and retailers? While the authors here provide no definitive answers to this question, they do present important insights and fresh perspectives on the dilemma.

The volume's concluding chapter by Bacon, Méndez, and Fox makes the important point that the main imbalance in the contemporary world coffee market is between organised producers in the South and the largely individualistic, environmentally and socially aware consumers in the North. The conclusion includes several policy recommendations for reversing this imbalance, however, it remains to be seen whether these are feasible and, if so, will have the desired impact. Overall the volume provides a nuanced overview of the recent coffee crisis and the variability of certification systems and coffee growing communities in Central America and Mexico. A significant weakness of the book is that the majority of the research presented by the authors was conducted prior to height of the crisis (2001–2003) and therefore, the case studies do not truly present data demonstrating how communities responded to the downturn in prices. However, the analytical framework established by the volume's editors in the introduction and conclusion helps to contextualise the included data and more than adequately demonstrate its relevance to contemporary market conditions.

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### 'Morning fix'

**Brewing justice: fair trade coffee, sustainability and survival**, by Daniel Jaffee, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2007, xvi + 331 pp., US\$22.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-5202-4959-2

**Changing forest: collective action, common property, and coffee in Honduras**, by Catherine M. Tucker, Dordrecht, the Netherlands, Springer, 2008, xviii + 258 pp., US\$109 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-4020-6976-5

**Javatrekker: dispatches from the world of fair trade coffee**, by Dean Cycon, White River Junction, Vermont, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007, xviii + 239 pp., US\$19.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-9333-9270-7

Three new books about coffee explore elements of both sustainable development and conscious consumption. The first book I consider here is an in-depth monograph on fair trade, the second analyses the effects of coffee production on forest management, and the third provides glimpses into the world's main coffee producing regions.

## 1

By examining the perspectives of fair trade participants both in the Global South (producers) and North (activists and consumers), *Brewing Justice* demonstrates the main contradictions and currents in fair trade. Jaffee addresses a main tension between charity and solidarity found in the Christian-based values shared by most participants in the movement and market. The author's discussion of this tension helps the reader understand not only the groups involved in fair trade, but also the terrain on which they manoeuvre.

Jaffee begins by debating whether fair trade constitutes a market niche or an entirely different market in itself. Although he wishes to give equal importance to each argument, and goes to great lengths to show the different argumentative merits of each, it becomes clear as the book progresses that fair trade is a market niche. It is a niche of high quality commodities produced under stringent quality controls, in a hierarchical arrangement between North and South. What makes fair trade simultaneously appealing and appalling is the gap between the goals and the actual deliverance: the promise to cut down most of the middle agents in order to enhance the encounter between producers and consumers versus the actual procedures to ensure the quality of the fair, and usually organic, commodities, which involve an expanding number of marketing seals and expensive teams of experts. The criteria to fit into the fair/organic market are complex and changing. Although fair trade advances different goals from the mainstream market, it is not free from its basic considerations. Quite the opposite: fair trade constitutes a very selective niche for the most educated and concerned consumers – those moral and politically concerned by the aforementioned tension. Jaffee clearly points out the non-denominational, yet stark Christian contours and meanings of the whole ideological apparatus. Additionally, he suggests that fair trade is not enough to take the participants to 'a separate reality' where another world (market) is possible.

In Jaffee's journey to Ixtlán, he explores the effects and possibilities of fair trade for coffee producers from the Zapotec villages of Oaxaca, Mexico. He shows the scale and type of organisations able to partake in the gospel of fairness: small, Catholic-based communities. A main contribution of *Brewing Justice* is that it demonstrates, contrary to activist commonsense, that not all small peasant and indigenous producers are willing to participate in fair trade, and, more importantly, that the line between participants and non-participants is not socio-economic, but rather conditioned by an ideological process. Participants share a profound conviction based on a mystical sense of justice that justifies both exacting labour from family and fictive kin, and enduring the many meetings and constant oversight of their work. Jaffee demonstrates that the production of fair and organic coffee requires more labour and money than that of regular coffee, and that the premium payments it brings barely compensate the cost of hired workers and the investments needed in the grove's renewal. On the one hand, the author suggests that fair trade makes a difference for these communities as profits are distributed within the villages

and households of participants and hired labourers. On the other hand, however, even in the best case scenario (such as the organisation of premium coffee producers studied by Jaffee) fair trade production is unable to break the cycle of severe poverty as promised in the many marketing campaigns. Even more troubling, the current organisation and working of the fair trade market reinforces the producers' disadvantage in relation to their partners from up North – a disadvantage it was supposed to undo. The exploration of these tensions and contradictions makes this book a rewarding read.

However, these sobering research findings are at odds with the author's intention to rescue the most out of them; not only is the prose far too optimistic for the evidence he presents, but Jaffee suggests increased efforts and reforms to enhance fair trade. This would not be a problem if the book were only intended for the activists who share the same values of solidarity or charity, but the fact remains that it will be read beyond this small minority of consumer-activists. It is important to consider that, as the target of many good-hearted initiatives preceding this movement, the 'Global South' has learned a few lessons. One paramount lesson is that good intentions tend to be useless when dealing with severe rural poverty. *Brewing Justice* concludes that the commercial efforts of fair trade are not enough to break down the cycle of immiseration in which colonised populations are starved while producing high quality commodities for the epicureans up North. Not only are the reforms insufficient for an effective change in basic welfare, but considering their increasing demand for labour, training, and subordination, the solidarity of the intermediaries and consumers is whitewashed into charity.

Conflict-based approaches to social realities have been displaced by consent-oriented representations of imagined communities. Fair trade is a very good example of this: its reformist and charity agendas are relevant for, and have to fit the wishes of, affluent audiences and consuming nations. A case in point is that throughout the book, the voices of the growers are one-sided, static, and superficial. Their opinions are predictable, and always in support of the image of Indians as guardians of biodiversity. Such images of the Global South work with transnational donor audiences as part of the package to sell goodwill and coffee. It is worth mentioning that in Oaxaca (the Mexican state where Jaffee conducted his field research) this conflation of people and nature is advanced by government and oppositional forces around a very problematic 'common law' (*usos y costumbres*), and that these are political rather than cultural debates. The author is too respectful towards one camp of representations. By espousing diversity as a given, he ends up reiterating a commonplace trope in the embattled Oaxacan groves and streets.

## 2

In *Changing Forests*, Tucker offers us another valuable perspective on coffee production among Mesoamerican farmers. The analysis focuses on the last fifty years but considers ancient (10,000 years) and colonial (500 years) periods in the shaping of western Honduras' forests. The author explains that forests are never 'natural'; rather, they are a product of human use and interaction for the survival of agricultural communities. The dramatic colonial transformations forced a series of compromises between European and indigenous understandings within contradictory trends towards conservation and exploitation. The forest is appropriated for the survival of the population. However, within the syncretism of folk tradition there

are elements and trends that inhibit abusive practices through regulatory rituals. The state-led developmental apparatus, through commercial logging, brought a crisis in forest management and community survival to *La Campa* (the field site, municipality, and forest under study). And in response to this crisis, the community rebelled at a time when the Honduran government and military were eager to negotiate given the surrounding Central American liberation wars. Coffee became the neoliberal development strategy.

Coffee has brought both favourable and unfavourable effects to the forest. On the one hand, it contributes to the conservation of the forest by increasing the covered surface, increasing the carrying capacity for larger animal populations, and requiring the association of other plants for shade. Shade grown coffee is good for the environment for these reasons. On the other, coffee under capitalist social relations of production involves differentiation. There is differentiation among producers competing for land, labour, and capital. This is usually done, like in *La Campa*, through land privatisation and concentration, the management of landless labouring populations (which should remain land deprived and, to a degree, literally starved), and through conflicting attempts to secure credits and purchasing markets. This well known paradox is worth reviewing in Tucker's larger and deeper analysis of *La Campa's* forest in western Honduras because *La Campa* is unlike most Central American and Mesoamerican regions suitable for coffee in that coffee is a new cash crop there. This allows us to see what can be considered 'coffee effects' in forest management and in farmers' subsistence strategies in the present, without the need to consider the usually one hundred and fifty (giving or taking fifty) years of coffee-conditioned and layered experiences of the neighbouring countries (as in Jaffee's case).

Coffee is a highly volatile commodity due to the complicated variables involved in the international market, but there is still room for new producers. New producers, as individuals and businesses, can still make profits from coffee. This happens on a highly differentiated basis where not all of those involved can break even; in a variable correlation, generated by different conditions, some would grow rich, others would just survive, and still others would be ruined. The common effect would be an increased pressure and competition over premium lands. This brings us to challenge two keywords used by Tucker to qualify her study: coffee does indeed contribute to making *La Campa* a 'sustainable' forest, but it erodes the 'resilience' of its population, maybe for good.

### 3

As the previously considered books prove, coffee is a commodity produced for profit in an extremely uneven world market. Social studies on coffee teach us how complex and contradictory capitalist development is by focusing on one of the few tropical cash crops that allows for the possibility to accumulate profits with high social costs. In these studies, the central focus is not coffee – the commodity – but rather its social relations of production. The reverse idea is behind *Javatrekker*, in what constitutes a perfect case of commodity fetishism by goodwill. The stories are entertaining for an educated readership of coffee lovers who may want to know a little more about their morning fix. And they would get just a little bit more. Coffee, the sobering stimulant, ends the morning haze of dreams and sleep to help consumers face daily chores with an alerted consciousness. *Javatrekker* works towards the opposite goal, indulging in the idea that there is

something to be shared between producers and consumers outside the iron fist of capitalism.

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