

Economics, trade, and finance

LYON, SARAH. *Coffee and community: Maya farmers and fair-trade markets*. ix, 266 pp., maps, illus., bibliogr. Boulder: Univ. Press of Colorado, 2010. \$75.00 (cloth), \$32.95 (paper)

Situated within the coffee co-operative of 'La Voz Que Clama en el Desierto', Guatemala, but also incorporating importers, retailers, and consumers, *Coffee and community* examines the pan-global relations between participants in a fair-trade coffee network, and looks critically to assess the benefits and drawbacks for small-scale farming communities participating in such networks. The text is transnational and far-reaching in scope, yet Lyon's analysis is at its strongest when ethnographically grounded in the micro-politics of La Voz's organization. She demonstrates that co-operation is hard work and highlights the tensions that emerge among members, particularly in relation to debt, alternative markets, and quality control. Moreover, in elucidating how these pressures are negotiated, Lyon effectively counters romantic notions of mutuality commonly perpetuated by consumers, fair-trade advocates, and retailers. It is unfortunate, however, that her ethnography of consumers is not as rich or nuanced as that of the co-operative members.

Lyon further explores the issues that surround the introduction of an additional management tier into the co-operative, and she shows how La Voz's members have to develop, acquire, and hire new skills and knowledge in

order to engage effectively with intermediaries and manage the regulatory mechanisms on which fair-trade certifications – and economic premiums – are premised. Her discussion of the ways these exogenous and younger managers interplay with existing systems of prestige and established community hierarchies, for example the cargo system, is subtle and enlightening, particularly in relation to corruption charges, although La Voz's decision not to obtain shade-grown certification is presented as a surprisingly smooth and homogeneous process in comparison.

The analytical framework employed in *Coffee and community*, which looks to encompass the co-operative's network, rather than centrally focus on its place within the community, is both its strength and its weakness. On the one hand, it enables Lyon to highlight the, oft-observed, role of intermediaries and show how discourses of coffee 'quality', for example, are reproduced, as well as demonstrating how multiple understandings of 'organic', 'fair-trade', and 'shade-grown' are invoked and evaluated. On the other hand, broader economic relations within the community are rarely considered, and although Lyon provides tantalizing hints at wider patterns of economic change and diversified livelihoods, her discussion of La Voz is not situated within these processes and an early discussion of historical processes remains largely contextual. Consequently, we are not given any sense of alternative household strategies and how these potentially interplay with coffee production. This is a significant oversight, especially as it becomes evident from the ethnography that La Voz does not exist in isolation but is, rather, entwined with other spheres of economic practice, including tourism, development projects, and the channelling of co-operative resources into children's education, and it is also indicated that coffee is not the sole source of income for many co-operative members. Yet, much of Lyon's analysis is framed as if this was the case and consequently inevitable questions regarding the collective management of debt burdens, hierarchies of expenditure and investment, and alternative sources of income remain unanswered. Furthermore, as Lyon suggests that children help pay back the debt of their education, her discussion of co-operation could have been extended to incorporate potentially new, and unexpected, forms of mutuality to which La Voz gives rise. Similarly, her claim that the economic benefits of fair-trade trickle down cannot be assessed as it is unclear whether community

prosperity is a direct result of the co-operative and coffee production or originates from a range of diversified economic practices and opportunities.

Coffee and community is therefore a rich ethnography of the micro-politics of a co-operative and offers a valuable assessment of the consequences of fair-trade on the actors involved. By indicating both its benefits and limitations, and discussing how the system could become more equitable, Lyon highlights that La Voz's members are active agents working within a structurally asymmetrical framework, and demonstrates how they use the resources available to improve their economic position and establish a stronger voice within the coffee commodity network. Nevertheless, Lyon's overarching argument that La Voz's members negotiate the regulation and tensions of fair-trade because of the economic payback is unconvincing, and the opportunity to evaluate fully the impact of fair-trade on the wider community, and the way it interplays with other spheres of economic practice, is not fully developed. Consequently the potential contribution that *Coffee and community* could have made to pressing questions regarding the adaptation of smallholder agriculture to global markets, and its attraction *vis-à-vis* alternative economic strategies and sources of social capital, is sadly not fully realized.

EMMA-JAYNE ABBOTS *Food Studies Centre, School of Oriental and African Studies*