



# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

EDWARD F. FISCHER, 2022, *Making Better Coffee. How Maya Farmers and Third Wave Tastemakers Create Value*. Oakland: University of California Press, 306 pp. ISBN 9780520386969.

Keywords: Economic Anthropology, Maya Coffee, Values, Tastemakers, Social Sciences

*“The history of coffee becomes inseparable from the history of colonialism, imperialism, and the rise of global capitalism.”* (Tucker, 2011: pp. 33–34)

What makes a coffee “better”? What constitutes “quality”? How are prices legitimized? With those questions in mind, anthropology professor Edward Fischer gives us insight on twenty-first century global political economy by analyzing how economic gain is conceived and produced within processes of high-end coffee commercialization. The creation of value is the main topic of this ethnographic research, carried out between the United States and Guatemala’s highlands. Focusing on attempts to build social relationships through Third Wave coffee trade, the author goes beyond standard definitions of coffee as a commodity, by taking into consideration symbolic values and narrative connections among growers, traders and tastemakers. In this context, quality is not anymore just a matter of taste, instead, it reveals underlying inequalities, capable of determining subjective experiences as well as influencing broader social and cultural dynamics.

Martinez-Torres considers coffee as a product “around which the dependent economies of many states in the tropics were developed” (Martinez-Torres, 2006: 129). *Making Better Coffee* allows the reader to gain awareness on the “neoliberal matrix of power linked to legacies of colonialism” in which exchanges take place, therefore raising the question of mass production, power relations and the increasing “commodification of culture” within contemporary capitalist society (Nash, 2000: 129). Fischer analyzes strategies implemented to “liberate food

systems from industrial-scale production,” questioning the linear equation between money and privilege by stating that “power derives from the ability to define what quality is” and not only from controlling the means of production (4). The book distances itself from developmentalist theories, recognizing that farmers have a significant role in shaping consumer desires and experiences. Underlying how different forms of value are built, the author acknowledges their agency, refusing to reduce power to material conditions and profit seeking criteria.

Talking about a chain of production and distribution would presuppose a linear vision that situates the start of the exchange at the moment of the production and the end at the final tasting. This study observes contradictions between ideals and practice and is able to account for the ramifications, ambiguities and intermittences of coffee exchanges as “relational structures” (Le Velly, 2011: 54) and markets as “moral projects” (Fourcade and Healy, 2007: 141). Unequal and stratified hierarchies within market economy, class and colonial legacies are not erased nor invisibilized: power systems and objectification practices influence the conditions of Maya workers (Escobar, 2005: 142), while embedded in a complex system of values, and not only built around political and economic criteria. This process prevents the passivization of indigenous communities as victims of a unilateral relationship of power and dependence beyond their control. Instead of reproducing a sharp divide between “hostile-worlds beliefs,” the author manages to convey the profound complexity of the phenomenon, realizing that the social and the economic sphere coexist and “contaminate each other” when they come into contact, and therefore cannot be considered as isolated (Zelizer, 2006: 174).

The book also includes an important work on existing literature on the topic, thus representing a particularly interesting and enriching tool for researchers and scholars, yet it remains open and accessible also to a non-specialized and broader audience. Furthermore, the researcher provides a deep reflection on his own preconceptions, addressing the problematic enigma around *ethnographic authority* (Clifford 1983). He ultimately allows his fieldwork to genuinely surprise him, subverting his perspective and “unravelling the complexities of lived experience, and taking seriously the hopes and concerns of those we study” (197).

There is no symmetry between Third Wave coffee producers, intermediaries, traders, buyers and tastemakers, as, “value worlds converge and collide” in the attempt to create overlapping paths towards the common goal of *producing better coffee* (201). In this book materiality encounters ideologies, shaping contemporary economic, social and cultural conditions and

“possibilities of human dignity” (Antrosio and Colloredo-Mansfeld, 2015). The meaning conveyed by the beans speaks in terms of hardship, justice, worth and desires. The power of *Making Better Coffee* rests within the life stories of all those social actors who collectively participate in the production of values, a word that needs to be plural to account for the multilateral flows inhabited by each cup of this worldwide famous black drink.

*“We call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them. [...] In a word, exchange is not a by-product of the mutual valuation of objects, but its source.”* (Simmel in Appadurai, 1986: 4)

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