

Anthropology Review Database

Weaver, Thomas, James B. Greenberg, William L. Alexander, &
Anne Browning-Aiken (eds.)
2012 ~~Neoliberalism and Commodity Production in Mexico~~ Boulder, CO :
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ABSTRACT: A team of anthropologists with expertise in Mexico contribute their specialties to this valuable study of the impact of neoliberalism on commodities from coffee and corn to grapes, fish, and lumber, providing a solid analysis and critique of the neoliberal regime.

Anthropology is no stranger to globalization and neoliberalism, as two main conceptual orientations adopted in this new collection--the anthropology of place and the anthropology of commodity chains--clearly demonstrates. Anthropology is also no captive to 'the village' or the (allegedly) isolated field site, which has been obvious at least since the introduction of the notion of 'multi-sited ethnography.' The present book, as the editors explain in their brief preface, is "an anthropological approach to Mexico's experience with neoliberalism" specifically examining "its effects on the production and distribution of some basic commodities" (p. vii). As such, it reaches down to the local level (the specialty of our discipline) "to paint a more human portrait of these processes from the perspective of smallholders and producers, many of whom are from rural and indigenous communities" (p. ix).

The fifteen chapters of the book offer descriptions of an exciting range of commodities, mostly agricultural, from mangoes and limes (Alvarez) to grapes (Carter and Alexander), corn (Gonzalez Rios), lumber (Weaver), and of course coffee (Greenberg and Sesia). There are also contributions on fishing (Vasquez-Leon) and water (Browning-Aiken and Emanuel).

A number of the chapters are more theoretical or historical in nature, including the editors' opening discussion of 'the neoliberal transformation of Mexico' and their second essay on 'theorizing neoliberalism.' Most of the later selections are also theoretical/historical, such as Nahmad's presentation on World Bank policies, Greenberg and Heyman's offering on neoliberal capital and mobility, and Weaver's discussion, reminiscent of Laura Nader's famous article "Up the Anthropologist," urging us to 'up the mode' in investigating post-neoliberalism or grassroots (and occasionally higher-level) resistance to the hegemonic paradigm.

In their preface, the editors claim that the volume "is not an edited collection as much as a group enterprise" (p. x), and they are correct. In fact, this is the most satisfying aspect of the book: it harks back to some of the interesting and iconic team ethnography of mid-century anthropology, such as the Six Cultures project or Abram Kardiner's *The Psychological Frontiers of Society* with studies by Ralph Linton and Cora Dubois. One ongoing example is the anthropological research team from the Arctic Center of the University of Lapland (<http://www.arcticcentre.org/InEnglish.iw3>). Because contemporary culture is invariably so global and multi-sited, group enterprises such as are very desirable and may become the standard for fieldwork in the future.

Having said this, I experienced two mild frustrations with the volume. First, I would have liked to see even more case studies on even more commodities; those chapters were far and away the most original aspects of the collection. Second and following from the first, the conceptual/historical essays began to become a bit redundant by the end;

while the points are crucial, several of the chapters repeat the political-economic history of Mexico, the definition and features of neoliberalism, and the activities of institutions like the World Bank. Arguably, the book could have succeeded with less space dedicated to these issues, freeing more space for ethnography of specific commodity production.

Nevertheless, *Neoliberalism and Commodity Production in Mexico* is important for a number of reasons. Such a detailed and varied look at one particular country is unique and valuable; that this look is actually a set of overlapping looks is yet more desirable. The authors speak with a consistent voice (one that is very critical of neoliberalism) and decisively prove the relevance of the anthropological perspective on what, for too many people, is a purely economic subject. Some of the chapters may even become required reading on neoliberalism, and politicians, pundits, and the public would be well served to encounter the material. Neoliberalism is more than hegemony, as the contributors show; it is also a discursive regime and veil of illusion.

I hope that more anthropologists and other investigators are inspired by the model of the book and attempt similar studies of other countries, regions, and even specific societies. The world is too complex for one person or one perspective to embrace; the future of anthropology may be not just multi-sited ethnography but multi-anthropologist ethnography.

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