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Review : Coffee Culture : Local Experiences, Global Connections

By Catherine M. Tucker

Reviewed by Yves Laberge

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Tucker, Catherine M. *Coffee Culture: Local Experiences, Global Connections*. New York: Routledge, 2011. xv+160 pp. ISBN: 9780415800259, US \$29.95, paperback. Series: Routledge Series for Creative Teaching and Learning in Anthropology

Obviously neither about agriculture nor about the growth of coffee in wide plantations, this interesting essay concentrates on the social dimensions of coffee drinking, mainly in America. Although it covers five centuries (see Chapter 5, p. 36), it is not *per se* a “history of coffee in modern societies.” Rather, it is a rigorous anthropological study of how coffee has become a banal but nonetheless omnipresent element in everyday life, making its billions of consumers (and especially teenagers) forget about its cultural, economical, and addictive dimensions. The daily consumption of coffee implies social values and reproduces some “cool” associations that are efficiently marketed in the mass media and planned in high-scale advertisements (p. 20). It was the U.S. coffee lobby (the Joint Coffee Publicity Committee) that conducted ads and created the unavoidable “coffee break” back in the 1920s, which remains still an unnoticed dimension of the American Way of Life. “The coffee lobby also promoted the integration of coffee drinking into everyday home life through a home economics service, which advised housewives on how to prepare coffee to keep their husbands happy” (p. 19).

Observing the U.S. plus some parts of Latin America (notably Honduras), Catherine Tucker (from Indiana University in Bloomington) explains how the coffee industry is still getting bigger, noting the impressive numbers behind the “growing coffee consumption and the popularity of coffee shops” (p. 4) evidently linked with the presence of caffeine, which still “is generally regarded as safe” (p. 5). Right from the first pages, the author aptly demonstrates that coffee is now everywhere and “Coffee shops have become a global phenomenon” in almost any city or airport (p. 3). She defines her core concept of “Coffee culture” as “the ideas, practices, technology, meanings, and associations regarding coffee,” posing Starbucks cafés as one possible example that illustrates Coffee cultures with its specific brand, ways of belonging and related images (p. 7). Of course, cyber cafés represent another example of Coffee cultures that are studied here as well (p. 9).

In Chapter 8, Professor Tucker observes the links between the ways coffee is either produced or consumed and national identities in four countries studied individually: Brazil and Columbia (both important producing countries) and then Britain and Germany, noting as opposite examples that while Brazil tends to disgrace its coffee production because of its historical connection with slavery until late 19th century, Columbia takes a fierce national pride in its significant coffee production (p. 59). The following Chapter 9 (co-written with Élise DeCamp) explores further the social representations of coffee in popular culture, for example in humour and caricatures.

The most interesting passages highlight the various side effects of coffee and the dangers related to caffeine (mainly in Chapter 10): “In several recent studies, ovarian cancer appeared to be mildly associated with high levels of coffee drinking” (p. 80). The last pages related to fair trade certification and the consumption of “fair” coffee confirm many doubts and worries, noting that “Some fair trade cooperatives have been unable to make a profit, and have found the

system to be impersonal and excessively demanding” (p. 141), adding that “In some ways, fair trade has become a servant of the global system” (p. 141).

Professor Catherine Tucker’s *Coffee Culture* is a fascinating book because it reveals so many unnoticed dimensions about an apparently inoffensive commodity, which confirms why social sciences such as anthropology are relevant. This is the kind of useful book that should be put in the hands of teenagers before they become initiated to coffee drinking, and therefore should be made available in public libraries, colleges and high schools.

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