

The Political Ecology of Bananas: Contract Farming, Peasants, and Agrarian Change in the Eastern Caribbean. Lawrence S. Grossman. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London. 1998. Pp. 268. \$19.95 (paper) \$49.95 (hardcover) ISBN 0-8078-4718-6.

Bananas seem such a simple fruit, but their route to the local market has always been a complicated one, bound up in political and economic imbalances whose roots reach back to the colonial era. In *The Political Ecology of Bananas*, geographer Lawrence Grossman adds an interesting new chapter to this history, analyzing the recent trend away from vertical monopoly toward contract farming of bananas in the Windward Islands. His book arrives at a time when the geography of the banana industry seems likely to change dramatically, because of a recent World Trade Organization decision that may open the European market to the cheaper bananas of such traditional powers as Dole, Del Monte, and Chiquita, at the expense of farmers in the Windwards.

Grossman's aim is examine how well banana contract farming fits ideas about the rise of contract farming generally in this new era of globalization. In contract farming, a purchaser agrees in advance to buy farmers' output but sets procedures for crop production and often provides technological and economic assistance to ensure crop quality. The guaranteed market and the assistance are a benefit to farmers, and the buyer sheds the risks associated with growing the crop. This arrangement has now become common in tropical export agriculture, particularly for labor-intensive specialty crops grown in small peasant plots. As Grossman explains, contract farming has often been seen as responding to the same forces that drive broader industrial restructuring, and contract farmers have been seen as analogous to factory workers, diverted from producing varied food crops for local consumption to producing a standard export commodity to exacting specifications and with high inputs of pesticides and fertilizers. Grossman's thesis is that this view is oversimplified and misleading, and he demonstrates it via a detailed case study of the banana industry of St. Vincent.

The first four chapters of the book provide a progressively detailed introduction: the history and organization of the Leeward Islands banana industry, the rise of banana contract farming, the agricultural history of St. Vincent, and finally the agricultural life of a small village, Restin Hill, where Grossman has carried out detailed studies of the local response to contract farming. Thereafter, the author applies insights from each of these scales to three themes in the literature of contract farming, termed the "labor question," the "food question," and the "environmental question." Grossman points out that farmers in general are not industrial automatons but rather skilled workers who have always had to master a variety of tasks to produce their crops, and that banana farmers in particular have had to adopt increasingly complex technological "improvements" designed to produce the perfect fruit expected on European tables. The inventive ways in which individual farmers adapt to these new requirements show well how they maintain a degree of autonomy despite the power wielded by the buyer. Grossman shows that banana growing is not necessarily done at the expense of local food production, as commonly supposed. In fact, Vincentians have a tradition of food

importation that goes back to the salted codfish of colonial days, and that is presently encouraged by the lower prices of imported than local staples. Contract farming is commonly believed to encourage wasteful and dangerous pesticide use, but in Restin Hill villagers recognize some compounds as toxic and take precautions with them, while experimenting in a variety of ways with their application, not always with detrimental effects. In all these themes, Grossman emphasizes that the complexity of the local adaptation to contract farming often defies both intuition and easy generalization.

Grossman's prose is direct and sometimes vivid, particularly in descriptions of village life and the practical hardships of banana growing. I especially enjoyed his brief discourse on the Vincentian diet. All those chicken backs and necks we *don't* eat at Kentucky Fried Chicken are exported to places like St. Vincent, where they make up an astonishing 40% of chicken imports. This book would certainly be a useful supplement to courses in agricultural geography, Latin American regional geography, and courses focusing on the rise of globalization. It could have been improved by shortening and better integrating the chapters in the first half of the book, and by including some background information (for example, about the various banana genotypes and diseases) in appendixes. I also wish he had explored further some of the questions raised. For instance, can the Windward Islands banana industry shift to production of specialty crops (including specialty bananas)? Is there any possibility of establishing grower-owned cooperatives to redress the present power imbalance in banana production? What other environmental impacts besides pesticide contamination might be exacerbated by banana production? How similar is the situation on St. Vincent to that on the other Windward Islands, particularly those outside the British sphere of influence? These questions aside, Grossman's book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the volatile historical geography of bananas and a useful illustration of the value of detailed local field work for leavening theoretical generalizations.

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