

standing the underlying debates, grievances and contradictions Ethiopia as a polity currently is confronted with.

Notes

- 1 Gebru Asrat, *Sovereignty and Democracy in Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa 2014 (in Amharic).
- 2 On the 2001 leadership crisis in TPLF, see also, e.g., Paulos Mekias, Ethiopia, the TPLF, and the Roots of the 2001 Political Tremor, in: *Northeast African Studies* 10 (2003) 2, pp. 13–66; Medhane Tadesse/John Young, TPLF: Reform or Decline?, in: *Review of African Political Economy* 30 (2003) 97, pp. 389–403.
- 3 Mulugeta Gebrehiwot Berhe, “Ethiopia’s poll has been pushed out by COVID-19. But there’s much more at play”, *The Conversation*, 18 May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/ethiopia-poll-has-been-pushed-out-by-covid-19-but-theres-much-more-at-play-138322> (accessed 17 June 2020).

Casey Marina Lurtz: *From the Ground Up. Building an Export Economy in Southern Mexico*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2019, 296 p.

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Regional history and its subsidiary micro-history continue to rewrite the narrative of Mexico’s economic and political development since its independence in 1821. Since Luis González y González in his *Invitación a la microhistoria* (1973) issued the challenge to explore the many Mexicos, dozens and dozens of studies using state and local archives, illuminated the upheavals that wracked the nation during the 1810s and 1910s, the politics, economics and quotidian life of the early republic, and the pre

and post Revolution. Historians produced and continue to produce nuanced stories about the regions and localities. Casey Lurtz’s *From the Ground Up* is another such carefully crafted, meticulous study, analyzing the economy of Soconusco in the state of Chiapas, the southernmost area of Mexico.

The analysis focuses on the development of an economy based on coffee exports. Soconusco was and is the leading producer of Mexican coffee, which was during the period under study (1870s to 1920) the nation’s second or third most important agricultural export commodity. The region was in the nineteenth century sparsely populated and isolated, with difficult, but immensely fertile land. It provides an interesting case to complement existing studies about vanilla, henequen and sugar. The author argues that none of the usual narratives and analyses of Latin American export economies apply to Soconusco. Most important, foreign plantation owners, who stole land from peasant villages and abused their workers, did not dominate. In fact, though there was a strong foreign presence, especially German, foreigners produced only half the coffee; small, local landowners accounted for the other half. Villages, small merchants, laborers, and plantation owners interacted and connected intimately and extensively to the global economy.

Professor Lurtz upholds one current tenet of Mexican historiography, that politics and economy centered locally, and discards another long ago, strongly held view that the globalization disadvantaged exporters of agricultural commodities. In the former view, historians concluded that neither the Díaz regime (1877–1911)

nor the Revolutionary regimes that followed were nearly as powerful as they once thought. Soconuscans seemed to operate by either ignoring or defying both the national government and the state government, when they judged the administration or laws of either entity were not in their best interests. In the latter perspective, an interpretation known in the 1970s and 1980s as the “dependency” theory or paradigm, the global system disadvantaged primary resource and agricultural exporters. Foreign investors often in conjunction with domestic elites dominated the export economies to the detriment of the host nation as a whole.

Soconusco was a melting pot of foreigners from Germany, China, Japan, Turkey, France, Denmark, Central America, and the Gilbert Islands. They and the local merchants and villagers forged the necessary structure for the emerging export economy, even when neither the national nor state governments provided it. The obstacles to this development were many. First, establishing ownership of the land was difficult. For decades, the border with Guatemala was in dispute. It was often unclear to which nation a plot of land belonged. The author devotes a chapter to the establishment of a permanent border that enabled the construction of the coffee economy. Without proper documentation of ownership, it was impossible to obtain credit. A second roadblock was the scarcity of workers. Coffee production was highly labor intensive. It was nearly impossible to attract enough workers to exploit fully the fertile land on the hillsides potentially cultivable for coffee plants. Producers never completely solved this problem. Consequently, they never used the land to capac-

ity (at least not before 1920). The partial solution was debt peonage. In this case, debt peonage was not the slavery like institution it was in other regions. Workers and planters alike knew that workers did not have to repay the advances they received. Although the plantations carried the debt on their books, they did not enforce repayment. The offer of advances in actuality served as an attraction to workers. Both planters and workers opposed reform efforts during the Revolution to abolish debt peonage, because it was in everyone’s interest to maintain it.

Credit was a third obstacle to development. Until nearly the turn of the century, no banking institutions serviced the region. A closely related fourth obstacle was the lack of laws and regulations concerning business transactions. The Díaz regime enacted these. Professor Lurtz examines in considerable detail how the Soconuscans adapted to the new rules. She traces the transformation from an informal credit structure with no written agreements or recourse to the courts to more formal institutional lending with property as collateral. She also discusses the adoption of futures or advance contract lending.

Professor Lurtz brings the narrative to life with the personal stories of Matías Romero, who left a substantial archive from his long career as a diplomat and entrepreneur, and the Bado family, import/export merchants, storekeepers, and coffee growers. Romero was of interest, because as a pioneer coffee grower, he failed, returning to Mexico City a bit poorer than when he arrived in Chiapas. Despite his lack of success, he was an effective propagandist for the region and helped draw investors. Antonio Bado came from Gibraltar

in the 1870s and as other ambitious foreigners who immigrated during this era, he married into a local elite family. His case is illustrative of how business in the region functioned. Bado died in 1898 with his holdings valued at 400,000 pesos, a substantial fortune. At the same time, he owed 200,000 pesos to creditors and debtors owed him nearly 200,000 pesos. His business interconnections spanned the globe, as well as the region.

From the Ground Up is an excellent contribution to the historiography of export crops. It has important evidence and insights into the development of local solutions to crucial impediments to export development, especially the lack of credit

institutions and a body of accepted business regulations, and into the role of foreign enterprise in the Mexican economy. Although the study does not emphasize politics, it sheds light, too, on the operations of the Díaz regime and the relations between small landowners and the revolutionaries after 1914. It is an important study because it supports the view that during the Díaz and revolutionary eras, Mexicans, not foreigners, controlled the Mexican economy, and that foreigners neither exploited their host nation nor abused its workers (at least no more than any other Mexican entrepreneurs or domestic business people anywhere else in the world).