

Banana Wars: Power, Production and History in the Americas. *Edited by Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. viii + 364 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, maps, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$79.95; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-822-33159-4; paper, 0-822-33196-9.

Reviewed by Ron Harpelle

Bananas do not grow on trees, but they are one of the world's oldest domesticated food crops and its fourth most important staple. If all the bananas grown in the world every year were placed end to end, they would circle the earth two thousand times. Only rice, wheat, and maize feed more people. The world's most popular fruit falls into two categories. Ordinary bananas represent 90 percent of the bananas produced on our planet. However, the most frequently told story on the subject is that of the dessert banana, which is grown strictly for export to Europe and North America, accounting for 10 percent of global production. The Cavendish banana and its predecessor, the Gros Michel, fall into this category, and the chronicle of how these fruits revolutionized the agro-export industry is the subject of *Banana Wars: Power, Production and History in the Americas*. The Cavendish banana represents about 99 percent of the bananas sold in Europe and North America, where the average person consumes fourteen kilos of bananas per year. The fruit is such an important part of the North American diet that, in an average supermarket, bananas account for 10 to 13 percent of all the sales in the produce section and 1 percent of total sales. What's more, an astonishing 83 percent of the bananas that make it to European and North American markets are grown in Latin America and the Caribbean.

As students of the region know, the evolution of the common banana into a major agricultural commodity parallels the rise of the United States as an industrial power. In the nineteenth century, the banana was a common kitchen crop in the tropical world. This began to change in the 1890s, and by 1920, the market was expanding to the United States and bananas were beginning to be identified as an "American" fruit. Today the banana industry is a billion-dollar industry, and bananas are the fifth-largest agricultural commodity in world trade. The success of the industry depends on the existence of a

complex, vertically integrated, multinational infrastructure, and, as a consequence, requires the subordination of entire national economies in the export-producing regions of the Caribbean and Latin America. This, then, is the backdrop for the “banana wars” described by the authors in Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg’s collection.

The book begins with an overview of the banana industry as a U.S. based global concern dominated by large corporations but also tied to countless small producers scattered around the world. The first section highlights the industry’s corporate agenda and the global battleground on which the banana wars are waged. Readers find out how a few large multinational corporations have shaped the modern history of the banana by leading an assault on small independent producers in the former European colonies of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Bananas produced with North America in mind, known as “dollar bananas,” are a threat to the economies of the countries that enjoy exclusive access to the markets of the European Union. The adversaries in these wars are generally described as small private producers on one side and multinational corporations on the other, but this characterization obscures the issue. Small producers in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific region find themselves pitted against plantation workers on the Caribbean mainland, who fear that their livelihoods are threatened by the small growers. In turn, the governments of several developing countries find themselves at odds in the battle for market share in Europe. The story of the dollar banana continues with chapters on the creation of a worldwide market for the fruit and the history of the United Fruit Company in Latin America. This section describes how export bananas differ from one another and demonstrates how a simple commodity shaped the histories of producing countries during the twentieth century.

The remainder of the book comprises a series of articles that illustrate the impact of banana production on the course of history in these developing countries. Thus we are shown how one industry, where the significant decisions are made in corporate boardrooms abroad, can shape the economic, social, and political future of a nation. A central theme of this section is the role of ethnicity in the labor forces of the various countries. Tackling two critical issues, Philippe Bourgois presents United Fruit Company correspondence, and Dario Euraque discusses race and ethnicity in Honduras. Bourgois reveals the industry’s hidden corporate agenda, while Euraque shows how racism is the

single issue that has been used to great advantage by opponents in their struggles against the multinational corporations. Throughout the banana-producing areas of Central and South America, the issue of the “foreignness” of the companies, or in the case of the region circumscribing the Caribbean, of the labor imported to work on the plantations, was used to unite local peasants, workers, and business leaders in a common front against the corporations and the local politicians who supported them. The context has changed over the years, but the same groups that were once opposed to foreigners in their midst are now fending off threats from countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific region.

In the second section, South America, specifically Ecuador, intersects with Central America and the Caribbean. For the most part the book’s coverage of the dollar-banana industry is almost exclusively centered on the Caribbean basin and the southern coastal region of Ecuador. Bananas grow throughout the American tropics, but Ecuador is the only major exporter of the fruit outside the Caribbean region. The expansion of the industry to Ecuador and the development of that country into the world’s largest exporter of the fruit require more study, because Ecuador is unlike Caribbean countries. In a sense, Ecuador falls between the two types of systems employed by the industry. Whereas island bananas tend to be grown by small producers who belong to cooperatives, on the mainland the industry has favored large company-owned plantations that sometimes supplement their production with bananas grown by small and medium-sized private producers. In Ecuador, on the other hand, large private producers have banded together in order to dominate the industry. “American” multinationals are present in Ecuador, but they act mostly as marketing agents. These differences exemplify the pragmatism of the giants of the banana industry, whose adaptability to conditions of the moment provide the glue that holds the collective together.

The last section of the book is devoted to the banana-export industry on the islands of the Caribbean. This is the story of peasant producers, cooperatives, and the global marketplace. Here the book comes full circle, returning to the issue of globalization and the particular banana war over the ability of Central and South Americans to gain access for their product in the European markets. Fruit from around the world has always been available in Europe, but the formation of the European Union

was accompanied by policies of preferential trade with former European colonies in Africa, the Pacific, and the Caribbean. This resulted in a banana war between the United States and the Europeans. When the book went to press a decision had yet to be rendered by the World Trade Organization. European governments were attempting to protect small producers in places like the Caribbean by imposing an import duty on dollar bananas. The United States government, in a response that illustrates the stakes involved in the export market for bananas, responded by imposing duties on luxury imports from Europe. Caribbean banana producers and their counterparts in Africa and Asia were caught in a trade war between the two camps. The United States has since won the war, and major economic adjustments are currently taking place in banana producing countries around the world.

If *Banana Wars* teaches readers anything about the bananas, it is that the individuals, corporations, and countries involved in the industry are capable of change. Niche markets for bananas are opening up, concerns are being raised in importing countries about the well-being of workers in producing countries, and consumers are asking more questions about the origins of the food they eat. The last chapter deals with the dialectical nature of the export banana industry, with an emphasis on the flexibility of the players involved. The banana industry and the individuals involved in production emerge as resilient actors in a drama that has stretched over a little more than a century. Although the authors demonstrate that the banana industry will continue to adapt to change, they do not sufficiently examine the part played by the small producers who operate on the margins of the industry or who are independent of it.

In this respect the book misses an opportunity to remind readers of the “civilian casualties” of the banana wars. The export industry is massive, but it represents a mere 10 percent of the world’s production, and the people who produce the other 90 percent of the fruit also have a story to tell. Small growers may not compete directly with the banana industry, but they must adapt to many of the same problems faced by the producers who are tied to export markets. The most significant problem facing producers everywhere is the spread of virulent plant diseases. While producers for export have come to rely more heavily on chemical treatments, small farmers are defenseless, and entire populations are at risk of losing one of their most important food sources. Although this subject is beyond

the scope of *Banana Wars*, it is important to remember that the problems created by the industry stretch far beyond the confines of the corporate plantations. Even if the workers, states, and corporations involved in the industry have proved themselves capable of adapting to change, it is important to remember the millions of nonbelligerent victims of this struggle. The next banana war is against time as scientists struggle to develop banana plants that are resistant to the diseases incubated by monocultural agricultural practices. The dollar bananas that are the heart of the banana wars will also be the source of casualties in the new conflict, which threatens to deprive millions of people in the developing world of a staple food source.

Ron Harpelle is professor of history at Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada. He is author of The West Indians of Costa Rica (2001) and is the producer and codirector of "Banana Split," a documentary film about the world's favorite fruit.