Viales Hurtado, Ronny J.; Montero Mora, Andrea M.: *La construcción sociohistórica de la calidad del café y del banano de Costa Rica. Un análisis comparado 1890-1950*. San José: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de América Central 2010. ISBN: 978-9968-9514-7-0; 208 S.

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What constitutes the quality of a product? Is it its physical appearance, its taste, its brand, or its national origin? Endless debates have circulated around the issue of quality and its definitions. The Costa Rican historians Ronny Viales and Andrea Mora recently published a book on the historical construction of quality, comparing the cases of coffee and bananas. As main export products, both of theseshaped the Costa Rican economy from the 19th century until the first half of the 20th century.

The authors assume that quality is a social and historical construct in which different actors, such as scientists, producers and consumers were involved. The authors also state that quality construction takes place at a transnational level. Viales and Mora analyze five key components influencing quality constructions: cultivation, production, processing, quality notions in marketing strategies, and the relationship between quality and prices. In general, sources available in Costa Rica are abundant in the case of coffee but scarcer in the case of bananas, a fact which is due to the dominant position of the United Fruit Corporation (pp. 17-18).

Analyzing the debates on cultivation and quality, the authors conclude that in both cases soil was considered a very important variable. Whereas in the case of bananas the physical appearance of the fruit was regarded as sign for quality; in the case of coffee its organoleptic aspects, such as taste and odor were also taken into account. Concerning production, the authors describethe intense debates about the influence of shade-giving trees for the quality of coffee. Starting at the end of the 19th century, the dispute reached its first peak in 1910 and continued until the 1950s. One of the strongest advocates of shade was the Costa Rican Institute for the Defense of Coffee. In 1950, the introduction of new varieties with less need forshade put an end to the controversy (pp. 50-56). For banana cultivation, the agricultural practices of irrigation and drainage became important aspects. In general, the United Fruit Corporation defined the quality standards and applied new cultivation techniques.

The introduction of processing methods required more technical equipment from the producers. In Costa Rica, the method of wet processing had already been introduced in the 1830s and spread throughout the whole Central American region. It became an important distinctive indication of high quality. Hence, coffee processed with the wet method was sold at higher prices on the international markets. In 1905, there were already more than 200 wet processing installations in Costa Rica (p. 80). Debates on quality in the 1930s and 1940s concentrated on the aspects of fermentation and drying methods. In the context of the economic crisis of 1929, an interesting discussion began on how quality could contribute to economic survival as prices for quality coffees were still higher (pp. 86-89).

The authors only brieflydiscuss the discourse of the exceptional quality of Costa Rican coffee with its historical roots in the 19th century. It would have been interesting to know more about changing perceptions of quality andthe connection tothe national origins of coffee.Studies on other commodities, such as cocoa have reflected on the link between place and quality.[1] In that sense, the special discourse on the quality of Costa Rican coffee has to be put in the context of nation building. The debate in the 20th century took place not only during economic crisis, but also during changes in the Costa Rican economy and in the export markets for coffee.

In the case of bananas, the authors offer a broad definition of processing including activities such as picking and carrying the fruit to the train platforms. As a consequence, the plantation workers are included as actors relevant for quality construction; an approach that is lacking in the case of coffee. After 1930, the Sigatoka disease led to a new form of banana processing. As the chemical treatment of

[1] Julie L. Cidell, Heike C. Alberts, Constructing quality. The multinational histories of chocolate, in: Geoforum 37 (2006), pp. 999-1007.

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the fruit left stains, washing became an important step (pp. 105-116). However, the debates on the different banana varieties and quality in the 1920s are not considered.[2]

From the world of production,in the following chapter, the authors move on to the world of trade and marketing. They analyze several promotional campaigns for Costa Rican coffee that first highlighted its special quality. With the integration of Costa Rica into the Pan American Coffee Bureau, the government supported more general campaigns to raise coffee consumption (pp. 132-140). In the case of bananas, marketing was less important,mainly due to the UFC monopoly. But the authors also admit to a lack of adequate historical sources concerning that subject (p. 148). In the first half of the 20th century,UFC made a more general campaign to raise banana production, and quality became a significant element of the campaigns from the 1960s onwards.

Finally, the authors offer some reflections on the relationship between price and quality. On the coffee markets, prices were established while taking altitude, regional origin, classification and the condition of the delivery into consideration. It was not until the 1930s to 1950s that the organoleptic aspects became more essential. In general, quality coffees from Central America had better opportunities on the European markets than in the United States. In contrast, the main criteria defining banana prices was the number of hands: the Costa Rican nine hand bunches were considered of high quality until soil degradation and diseases led to a decline (pp. 175-176).

In conclusion, the authors establish three key factors defining quality until the 1950s. The first factor was the local agroecological conditions, including as the most important aspects soil quality and plant variety. Second, the agricultural practices affected the appearance and organoleptic qualities of both products. Third, processing became a factor making technological investments more important. Marketing constituted a central aspect only in the case of coffee (pp. 181-183).

The study makes a significant contribution to the debate on the historical construction of quality, taking as an example two main Costa Rican export products. Recently questions have been raised on the reasons for change in quality constructions: Is it medical concerns, new knowledge, new techniques, national laws or a combination of all these above-mentioned factors?[3] In my opinion, further research on the transnational history of quality construction should incorporate the role of international actors as well as different quality notions at varying nodes of the commodity chains, and also on conflict negotiations between the different actors involved.

Christiane Berth über Viales Hurtado, Ronny J.; Montero Mora, Andrea M.: *La construcción sociohistórica de la calidad del café y del banano de Costa Rica. Un análisis comparado 1890-1950*. San José 2010, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 08.02.2013.

[2] John Soluri, Banana Cultures. Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States, Austin 2005, pp. 65-70.

[3] Jérôme Bourdieu, Martin Bruegel, Peter Atkins, „That elusive feature of food consumption". Historical perspectives on quality in Europe, in: Food & History 5 (2007) 2, pp. 247-267; Becky Mansfield, Spatializing globalization. A Geography of „Quality" in the Seafood Industry, in: Economic Geography 79 (2003) 1, pp. 1-16.

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