



# H-Environment

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**Introduction by Kara Murphy Schlichting, Queens College CUNY**

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**W**hat histories count as environmental history? This is a central question that motivates this roundtable on **Casey Marina Lurtz's** deeply researched, complex history *From the Grounds Up: Building an Export Economy in Southern Mexico*. Each of the authors involved in this roundtable, and Lurtz herself in her response, take this question seriously. The result is a productive roundtable that manages to successfully engage the historiographies of Latin America, of plantation economies and political economy, and of contemporary environmental history.

**Gail Triner** surveys how Lurtz builds a history of political-economy institutions through chapters on governance, land, labor, and capital. In moving away from the traditional histories of export economies and environment, Triner sees in Lurtz's work a number of important historiographic correctives. She additionally offers a number of questions as to ways in which Lurtz's framework could or could not be applied to narratives of economy building and land tenure, pointing out that divergent circumstances such as the density of prior colonial settlement, the presence of large slave populations, and varying physical requirements for exploiting and producing different resources could require different analytical questions as to the intersections of political economy and environmental history.

**Jennifer Eaglin** addresses Lurtz's methodology for framing the history of the creation of an export economy, and the challenges that limited the growth of an export market in the region. Rather than replaying the traditional plantation narrative focused on the arrival of the foreign planter, Eaglin says, Lurtz illuminates a different understanding of economic growth, underscoring the role of local actors who courted centralized government to support an export economy in the Soconusco. According to Eaglin, the result is a rethinking of the relationship between nineteenth century Latin American export economies and state-building, and lingering questions about what lessons might we draw from this relationship between global markets, diminishing resources, and migrant labor. She also asks Lurtz to further consider the complexities linking state building, market creation, labor, and the environment.

**Timothy W. Lorek** commends the archival research from which Lurtz configured her history of land and export economies from a distinctive "agro-ecology of capital" perspective. Lorek reflects on how to position *From the Grounds Up* in environmental history, and the ways Lurtz's work reflects the evolution of Latin American environmental historiography. Some environmental historians, Lorek notes, might want Lurtz to expand her consideration of Mexican coffee's commodity chain and the ecological implications of the coffee industry. **Christopher Boyer** also reflects on the role of environmental history in *From the Grounds Up*. Boyer points out that ecology is more prevalent in the first half of the book, and asks Lurtz to consider what the co-evolution of economy and ecology in the Soconusco might look

like in later chapters. Boyer commends Lurtz for her attention to the political economy of development, but also asks her to consider political ecology as a way to analyze place and natural resource use in “neotropical ecosystems.” Lurtz’s attention to physical and geographic qualities allows her to root her history of coffee production in concepts of geographic and economic “frontiers,” the insecurities and land tenure, and regional boosterism and governance.

Casey Marina Lurtz replies with an illuminating overview of how *From the Grounds Up* grew from a seminar paper into a dissertation and eventually a book, and how, in the process, her work shifted towards themes prevalent in environmental history. In the evolution of this project, Lurtz explains, place-based analysis remained a central goal. Taking a careful survey of the roundtable’s questions regarding environmental framing, Lurtz reviews the “environmental” roads not taken as well as the potential for such questions, specifically in an era of climate crisis, and in her new research. Lurtz reminds us of the importance of speaking across fields, and the value of environmental questions to scholars within and beyond the field.

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

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**Comments by Gail Triner, Rutgers University**

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**F**rom the *Grounds Up* is a compelling history of the ways in which individuals in one isolated region of Mexico both used and shaped institutions as it became a dynamic coffee exporter at the end of the nineteenth century. Casey Lurtz offers neither a traditional history of environment nor of export economies. The book does not focus on the environmental effects of creating a region that intensively produced coffee; neither does it emphasize the global markets as the motivator of an export economy. One key to understanding the book (or at least my interpretation of it) is to think of it as a history of political-economy institutions, and to understand institutions as the formal and informal “rules of the game” or the slow accretion of practices and laws by which individuals interact in a wide variety of settings. Reflecting the political-economy orientation of the book, after the introduction and a general historical background, it is organized around the iconic analytic categories relevant to economics: governance (two chapters) and land, labor and capital (one chapter each.)

The Soconusco was an isolated region in the backwater state of Chiapas Mexico until the late nineteenth century. The arrival of outsiders and slow legal reform came together to introduce the possibility of material improvement by transforming rich land into coffee fincas to supply global markets. The achievement of *From the Grounds Up* is to demonstrate that a wide range of locals and outsiders equally shaped this transition. The necessary legal and institutional changes were implemented locally, gradually and selectively. For example, a newly secure border (in this case between Guatemala and Mexico) ensured a consistent legal regime, but it did not – in the nineteenth century – impede the movement of people (Chapters 2 and 5). Guatemalan workers and Mexican, Guatemalan, European or North American land-owners or -developers appeared in the Soconusco when it was attractive to do so (Chapters 4 and 5). Government bureaucracies and justice were in constant tension with entrenched local bosses. Individuals invoked bureaucratic and judicial protection when they had confidence in their efficacy (Chapter 3). Landowners secured scarce workers in coffee fields with “incentivized labor contracts,” which were both more flexible and less coercive than stereotyped “debt peonage” arrangements (Chapter 5).<sup>1</sup> Securing land ownership with titled deeds both delineated existing land claims and identified available lands for further development. Increased business failures caused by the depression of coffee prices in the 1890s demonstrated the benefit of formal commercial and credit contracts and motivated their subsequent use (Chapter 6). In sum, new institutions and national law became effective when, and in the manner by which, they were invoked locally, and they were invoked locally when they were useful.

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Baskes, “Coerced or Voluntary? The Repartimiento and Market Participation of Peasants in Late Colonial Oaxaca,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 1 (1996) offers an earlier interpretation of debt peonage as a more flexible and less coercive institutions than is usually understood

Lurtz's perspective offers important correctives to many top-down historiographic traditions. She highlights the dynamic participation of the local population in taking advantage of economic opportunity, eclipsing both the macroeconomic interpretation of export economies from the 1970s and 1980s and the subsequent emphasis on the coercion of local or imported labor.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in contrast to an over-arching national narrative, legal and material reforms of Porfirio Díaz's 34-year-long political regime interacted with, but did not determine, local power relations and economic practices.<sup>3</sup> Following the *porfiriato*, locals participated in the Mexican Revolution beginning in 1910 as their circumstances dictated; Lurtz finds that in the Soconusco, relative prosperity with widespread participation did not create much incentive for revolution (169-72).<sup>4</sup> These are impressive shibboleths for a scholar to re-interpret convincingly in one book, as Lurtz does.

The strong contributions of *From the Grounds Up* derive from detailed and skillful analysis of a specific case study. Lurtz contextualizes this case by asserting its applicability more broadly throughout Latin America. This interpretive framework offers grounds for many questions. While the book adds great depth to the experience of building an export economy by extending the universe of participants, summarizing its barest bones actually reiterates the traditional story: A powerful outsider (in this case, a former Mexican Minister of Finance) bought land to produce coffee in 1872 (Chapter 1).<sup>5</sup> Despite his early failure, this experience anticipated the arrival of other aspiring producers and set off a long chain of local institutional and legal adaptations. Therefore, while it may seem nit-picky, it is worth suggesting that Lurtz adds important nuance by introducing a wider range of local participants who actively promoted their own interests, rather than overturning earlier historiography. Further, we should take the repeated assertion that this process was general throughout nineteenth-century Latin-American export economies as a call for comparative research in the vein that Lurtz opens, rather than as a settled conclusion. One could easily hypothesize widely divergent patterns of integrating local populations, institutional change and production practices based on such

<sup>2</sup> As examples of traditional analysis of export economies, see Enrique Cárdenas, José Antonio Ocampo, and Rosemary Thorp, eds., *The Export Age, the Latin American Economies in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, vol. 1, An Economic History of Twentieth-Century Latin America (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, in association with St. Antony's College, Oxford, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For traditional histories of national Porfirian dominance see, for example, Paul H. Garner, *Porfirio Díaz* (Abingdon Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2019); Peter V. N. Henderson, *Félix Díaz, the Porfirians, and the Mexican Revolution* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> The diverse pervasive impact of the Mexican Revolution can be found in Adolfo Gilly, *The Mexican Revolution* (London: Thetford Press, 1983); John Tutino, *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico: Social Bases of Agrarian Violence, 1750-1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols., Cambridge Latin American Studies (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> One of my detailed questions about the narrative is the author's consistent use of the term "emigrants" for the individuals who entered the Soconusco for the purpose of acquiring land and producing coffee. These individuals emigrated from their location of origins; but I would have thought that they were "immigrants" to the Soconusco. Since the text is, otherwise, very well and engagingly written, I can only wonder about this terminology.

circumstances as the density of prior colonial settlement, the presence of large slave populations, varying physical requirements for exploiting and producing different resources, etc.<sup>6</sup> The variances among these patterns may be as important and interesting as the widened universe of participants.

A third question about the interpretive framework is whether these ideas hold only for the construction of an export economy. In the case of the Soconusco, and broadly throughout Latin America, we understand strong impetus for economic change at the end of the nineteenth century to come from the introduction of primary-goods production for the purpose of export. But when the questions under study are the underlying political-economy institutions (political and legal security, secure property, responsive labor markets and financial instruments), don't those institutions also shape the practices of production for domestic markets? The inter-relationship between institutional change and local markets for subsistence goods in the Soconusco is not addressed. From this perspective, the case of coffee production in the Soconusco might suggest a re-framing and expansion of the old issue of "frontier expansion." Was building an export economy a particular form of frontier expansion, and did export markets differ from domestic markets? Framing the development of the Soconusco as a form of frontier expansion could offer an avenue of comparative interest for historians of the United States; it could also expand on the traditional comparative frontier historiography in interesting ways.<sup>7</sup> Beyond frontiers, positioning Lurtz's Soconusco research in this manner suggests a way of integrating with the more recent debate of the importance of institutions relative to natural resources for long-term economic outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

Building an export economy is, by definition, brutal and intentional environmental transformation. This observation remains unstated in *From the Grounds Up*.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the book strongly demonstrates that environmental transformation and local political economy shape each other. As a consequence, environmental and economic histories are inextricably intertwined. One aspect of the inter-relationship between environment and economics that may have deserved more attention is the

<sup>6</sup> Decades ago, Nancy Farriss suggested that geographic isolation and low population density may have aided in the relative freedom of Yucatecan Mayans colonial presence. Little subsequent research has followed up on this question. See Nancy M. Farriss, *Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, D. C. M. Platt, *Social Welfare, 1850-1950: Australia, Argentina, and Canada Compared* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1989); Albert O. Hirschman, "A Generalized Linkage Approach to Development, with Special Reference to Staples," in *Essays in Trespassing: Economics to Politics and Beyond* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation," *American Economic Review* 91, no. 5 [also available in *Revista de Economia Institucional*; Vol 7, 2005] (2002); Stanley L. Engerman and Kenneth Lee Sokoloff, *Economic Development in the Americas since 1500: Endowments and Institutions*, NBER Series on Long-Term Factors in Economic Development (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, as obvious as the statement may seem, I have not seen its implications explicitly explored in the historiography of Latin American export economies.

pattern of land development. *From the Grounds Up* has maps detailing the division of land into private holdings (Maps 4, 5 and 6; on pp. 89, 103, 109) but it is strangely silent on the criteria for the progression of settlement. Unless the pattern was random, then did the conditions for clearing land or the suitability of soil determine where people actually chose to plant their coffee bushes? Insight on this question could open a path for thinking about land prices, as well as the physical activities and consequences of clearing land and cultivating coffee in the Soconusco.

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**Comments by Jennifer Eaglin, Ohio State University**

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Reflections on *From The Grounds Up: A New Approach to Economic History*

**H**istorians have spilled much ink on agricultural export booms of the 19th century from coffee, bananas, sugar, rubber, to guano, and their economic importance to Latin America. These agricultural export economies have traditionally been associated with the “plantation narrative” of foreigner planters coming to make riches by mass-producing these goods on untouched lands. In *From the Grounds Up: Building An Export Economy in Southern Mexico*, Casey Lurtz contravenes this narrative by illuminating the rocky, contested way export markets grew with the critical involvement of multiple local Mexican often left out of these histories (7, 18). Focused on how the Soconusco grew from a small, isolated region in southern Mexico in the 1870s into the country’s largest coffee exporting region by 1920, her work reimagines how Latin American export economies should be seen historically.

Lurtz’s methodological approach directly contributes to reshaping our understanding of export economic history. In order for the Soconusco to establish an export coffee economy, a number of necessary changes had to occur. In six chapters, Lurtz traces one by one the challenges that limited the growth of an export market in the region. First, Chapter One introduces the main obstacles. Located in the far south below the Sierra Madre mountain range, the region was rife with violent cacique, or strongman, politics, weak institutions, porous borders, and an equally mobile migrant labor force that made it particularly challenging to integrate into larger national and international markets (22-25). In the following chapters, she then shows how multiple actors, foreign and domestic, large and small landholders, elites and local farmers, managed to overcome these challenges slowly, tenuously, and back and forth over time to establish the Soconusco’s export market.

Lurtz’s central contribution is her focus on bringing Latin Americans, not large-scale plantation owners, but villagers and locals, to the fore of this economic history. She deftly argues that locals reached out for the liberal institutions of a slowly centralizing national government to support the establishment of an export economy. Chapter Two highlights how the Soconusco’s position between Mexico and Guatemala produced border disputes and local violence that hindered the growth of the export market. Chapter Three shows how local planters, merchants, and villagers found ways to sidestep conflicts with local bosses who considered the entry of an export market a challenge to their authority and create space for commercial experimentation by using central administrative bodies, like local courts and the public records office (65, 68, 71, 76). In Chapter Four, Lurtz uses the transactional archive of the Soconusco to argue that interest in export agriculture “motivated villagers and planters alike to secure or obtain defensible title” for export production that had previously been held publicly or communally (89). Rather than the traditional story of locals losing land to plantation owners, villagers

employed land laws to hold on to small landholdings (93, 110). Their actions established a varied landscape of both small and large coffee farms that complicate images of plantation-driven export economies of the era (89). Similarly, Chapter Six reveals how the growth of the coffee economy incentivized locals to seek out liberal institutions to formalize previously established informal credit/debt systems used in the region (143).

Although focused on coffee in Mexico, *From the Grounds Up* has sweeping implications on how historians think about the connection between Latin American export economies of the 19th century and state-building more broadly. Lurtz is not the first to show that plantation production was not the exclusive production process of a particular export good even if that narrative dominates the literature of 19th century export booms.<sup>10</sup> However, Lurtz uniquely shows how building an export economy and establishing liberal institutions of a central government were simultaneously contested; sometimes the advancement of one facilitated the other and vice versa. Integrating the region into the global market meant breaking down established political, economic, and social practices and institutions, like the local political boss structure, in favor of a larger state governed system. Yet villagers repeatedly and strategically adapted these state institutions for personal gain. The export market's creation, just like centralizing the state government, was never a given but rather negotiated, cajoled, contracted, labored, traded, institutionalized, and governed by multiple actors every step of the way.

Lurtz's discussion of this unique case challenges foregone assumptions about 19th century export economies beyond Mexico, but she misses the opportunity to push the limits of its broader applications as well. I wanted her to push her analysis further on the connection between state building, labor, and the environment. She puts Latin Americans front and center in this process of state building and market creation, but this also means they are central in the extractive process of transforming the land for export production. As a historian of Brazilian sugar ethanol, I have seen how incorporating locals into histories of development also exposes a longer history of environmental degradation that gets swept under the rug in simple development analyses. Similarly, I wonder if Lurtz could have discussed the legacies of transforming the Soconusco into an export market on the land and people more. For example, in Chapter Five, Lurtz highlights one of the more unique outcomes of the Soconusco's dynamic path toward an export economy: the creation of migrant labor market with more autonomy than traditional Latin American markets that relied on imported labor, namely slaves and indentured servants, for export production (118). How does this relate to Mexico's continued connection to migrant labor in the 20th and 21st centuries? Perhaps extending her analysis to make a larger commentary on how the growth of export economies links to globalization would resolve this question and open space to comment on the

<sup>10</sup> For example, B.J. Barickman's *A Bahian Counterpoint: Sugar, Tobacco, Cassava and Slavery in the Recôncavo, 1780-1860* (Stanford University Press, 1998) debunked ideas that plantation driven sugar production was the exclusive form of sugar production in colonial Northeast Brazil.

environment and labor in the Soconusco today. By noting that establishing an export market is a critical step in a process that eventually morphed into the globalized markets we navigate today, could this case apply to the ongoing struggle between local, regional, and national politics over diminishing resources and migrant laborers into the 21st century?

Lurtz successfully challenges the historiographical idea that export booms are solely the product of plantation production by integrating a historical perspective on the economy, the state, and capital. In the process, she answers the call of Latin American environmental historian Mark Carey in his 2009 review of the field to place Latin Americans back in histories that have traditionally left them out in favor of traditional Eurocentric narratives.<sup>11</sup> Although not a traditional environmental history, her book successfully extends the limits of environmental history and economic history in unconventional ways by retelling an agricultural export history from a different angle. Lurtz shows how Latin Americans actively sought out and contested the slow process of building an export economy to build the Soconusco's position as a major agricultural export market from the coffee grounds (and ground) up.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Carey, "Latin American Environmental History: Current Trends, Disciplinary Insights, and Future Directions," *Environmental History* 14 (April 2009): 222.

**Comments by Timothy W. Lorek, Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, University of Michigan**

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Casey Marina Lurtz's new book, *From the Grounds Up: Building an Export Economy in Southern Mexico*, is a remarkable scholarly achievement. It is a model of careful and patient archival work with dense and often quantitative sources. Pulling together such a source base for a time and place such as the nineteenth-century Soconusco in southern-most Chiapas state is important enough. But in Lurtz's hands, these sources are adeptly put to task in the construction of a clear and consistent argument laid out in a series of well-organized thematic chapters. Graduate students in all kinds of seminars should dissect the book not only for its content but also as a study in how to transform unwieldy archival material into a digestible monograph.

If assigned in an environmental history seminar, however, students may get stuck on a foundational question: is this an environmental history? For all the skill of its composition, it may not be immediately obvious how Lurtz's book speaks to environmental historians. For many, this will be an insignificant detail. The book is clearly an economic, political, social, and borderlands history so what difference does it make if it *also* engages seriously with environmental history or makes a distinct contribution to that subfield? While I admit I am largely of this camp, I also think it is worth teasing out some of the specific insights this book provides for environmental historians. Such an exercise is worthwhile not only because this roundtable is oriented around environmental history, but also because Lurtz's book offers subtle reminders about the growth and evolution of that historiography in Latin America. In addition, the author's relative lack of engagement with some questions that surely will interest environmental historians opens opportunities for future scholarship on a border region too often overlooked despite its critical contemporary and historical importance.

Lurtz's book is less about coffee *per se*, than it is about land and export economies. The author emerges from a tradition of historians of Latin America long concerned with the topic of land and its changes over time. In a recent review of my own work, an anonymous reader pointed out the U.S.-centrism in the standard narrative of the rise of environmental history as a subfield and I think this bears repeating here. Contemporaneously with those recognized founders of environmental history working on the U.S. and U.S. West, historians of Latin America studied many "environmental" topics, even though these studies were not collectively labeled "environmental history" at the time. Like Donald Worster for the Great Plains in particular, Latin Americanist historians paid particularly close attention to changes to land and agriculture and the socio-political implications of these shifts. This academic genealogy is recognizable in Lurtz's book and highlighted in her acknowledgements. Most directly, she is a historian cut from the same cloth as John Womack at Harvard, who mentored Emilio Kourí, who went on to advise Lurtz, among others, at the University of Chicago. Like his contemporaries writing about

the U.S. West, Womack's groundbreaking work on agrarian struggle in Morelos deeply informed subsequent generations of scholars who sought to make sense of land, water, community, and natural resource politics in Latin American history. Emilio Kourí's 2004 book (also with Stanford University Press), *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico*, is just one significant example of this inheritance as it examines the evolving relationship between land and community in the vanilla-producing regions of Veracruz.<sup>12</sup> For contemporary environmental historians, it's important to recognize that this tradition from Latin America helped bring the ideas of, say, the Mexican Revolution to a broader audience, contributing crucial ingredients to the formation of new modes of analysis currently in vogue, such as the concept of the Nature State.<sup>13</sup> Lurtz is heir to this tradition and in many ways *From the Grounds Up* is a throwback to the influential agrarian (if not "environmental") histories of Latin America written in a previous era.

One example of Lurtz's throwback style and certainly one of the most impressive aspects of the book is her tracing of networks of capital, from futures markets to small day-to-day loans (see especially Chapter 6). This tracing is foundational to her overarching ambition to explain broadly "the whirlwind that was Latin America's late nineteenth-century export boom" and the "Soconusco's rapid ascension from backwater to Mexico's predominant exporter of coffee" (3). The tracing of credit in and out of the Soconusco recalls a number of Latin America-centric histories of capitalism, from John Tutino's work on Mexico's Bajío to Jeremy Adelman's contributions on Buenos Aires and much in between. And environmental historians certainly will recognize the value of tracing these credit networks to understanding a place's environmental footprint, a task most famously carried out by William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis*.<sup>14</sup>

Credit flows, futures markets, and personal loans not only contributed to the construction of an export landscape and the rooting of economic liberalism in daily life, they also politicized that landscape and those livelihoods. Lurtz pays attention to the specific distinctions in crops and offers what we might term an agro-ecology of capital. Unlike the mobile cattle that preceded them, coffee trees in the Soconusco were stuck in space and required several years to produce, meaning would-be planters needed security in their investment so they did not risk losing all before profiting. The slow maturation of a crop like coffee intensified the need to secure

<sup>12</sup> John Womack, Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); Emilio H. Kourí, *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the recent anthology by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, Matthew Kelly, Claudia Leal, and Emily Wakild (Eds.), *The Nature State: Rethinking the History of Conservation* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> John Tutino, *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Jeremy Adelman, *Republic of Capital: Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

property title or rights to public lands (*terrenos baldíos*) but also the need to fix the border with Guatemala, which had previously been ill-defined, contested, or ignored. Lurtz walks the reader through the processes of negotiation that created the fixed border and property regimes that accompanied the coffee boom. The results, a fixed border with a mobile labor force, would have far-reaching implications. One can see the lingering of that liberalism in today's border zone when Lurtz writes, "Fixing borders was in no way about fixing populations, and the movement of peoples into and across Mexico served the same economic ends that the newly established bounds promoted" (61). As she notes in the conclusion, today the Soconusco's workforce is still overwhelmingly Guatemalan and 82 percent of the land planted in coffee is done on property of less than five hectares.

The persistence of multiple scales of land ownership and cultivation in the Soconusco challenges the emphasis on the plantation as the primary subject of Latin America's export boom. To these ends, *From the Grounds Up* pokes another hole in the plunder economy narrative of foreign environmental exploitation in Latin America, what J.R. McNeill and others termed *raubwirtschaft*.<sup>15</sup> Latin Americanist historians now largely agree that site-specific histories offer deeper complexity and a greater cast of characters to complicate simplified narratives of foreign exploitation; nevertheless the echoes of dependency theory still reverberate, especially when non-Latin Americanists write about the region. "Historians, too," Lurtz writes, "have long failed to register the welter of ways small-time local producers integrated Latin America into global trade" (5). For that lesson alone, the book should be read by environmental historians, especially those based in the US or operating from global or structural perspectives. Lurtz offers a thick description of the local economy as it forms and evolves in a variety of ways that may not be discernible to those operating at larger scales. This makes for a crucial statement about the significance of local and regional contexts and the multiplicity of local actors operating within grand narratives of either economic systems or environmental change. As she writes, "By including villagers, laborers, small-time merchants, and local politicians alongside the traditional cast of foreign and state actors," she is able to "use the experiences of one peripheral region to better understand the penetration of globalization and new state institutions during the late nineteenth century" (6).

The book's soul is unapologetically anchored in the nineteenth century and this too is refreshing. Lurtz carefully declares her admirable intention to avoid situating the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) as a telos for her study (what John Womack termed precursorism and which Lurtz discusses on p. 11). Too often, Lurtz contends, scholarship singularly presents a continuous Porfiriato (1876-1911), the long reign of Porfirio Diaz in Mexico, as the leadup to revolution, rather than an evolving period worthy of analysis on its own terms. This is an important reminder for environmental narratives, not just social and political ones. The formation of

<sup>15</sup> J.R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42:4 (December, 2003): pp. 5-43.

commodity export zones and accompanying issues of land tenancy and water rights ought to be understood for the Porfiriato and all of the nineteenth century without the hindsight of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. Article 27 famously gave the postrevolutionary state primacy in land and water rights as well as in the regulation and distribution of concessions to exploit natural resources. That Lurtz manages to examine issues of land titling and agricultural production in the decades leading up to the Revolution and the Constitution of 1917 without letting these inform the questions she asks results in a study with nuance at the local level. Lurtz does not set out looking for exploitation or the land, water, and resource push factors leading to Revolution. As a result, she is able to illuminate the mixed scale patchwork of land ownership and coffee production in the Soconusco, which helps explain that region's relative lack of engagement with revolutionary appeals later on.

*From the Grounds Up* does evade some questions that environmental historians will understandably wish Lurtz would have examined further. For example, while the intensive focus on the construction of an export economy in the Soconusco makes for a cohesive book with clear intentions, environmental historians may wonder about other stops along Mexican coffee's commodity chain. What of the environmental imaginaries of consumers, for example? What did it mean to drink coffee from the Soconusco and what images did it conjure – whether the gendered tropicalism of Ms. Chiquita or the pastoral nationalism of the National Federation of Coffee Growers of Colombia's Juan Valdez? This is especially intriguing for the state of Chiapas, where the consumption of Zapatista coffee from the highlands has been imagined in recent decades as an act of environmental and social consciousness, solidarity, and even rebellion. Zapatista coffee sells at cafes in snowy places such as Traverse City, Michigan, where consumers can drink a coffee that “embodies the courage, strength, and dignity of the Mayan people of Chiapas.” In comparison or contrast, what does it mean to drink coffee from the Soconusco lowlands?

In fairness, pursuit of such questions would make for a radically different book. More in line with Lurtz's subject may be a second set of questions. What are the effects of coffee cultivation on the land in the Soconusco and how have these changed over time and, possibly, shaped property regimes? She briefly describes the tropical forest as an impediment to labor supply and environmental historians may wish to know more about this relationship. What are some other ecological implications of this industry, including for coastal ecologies of mangroves and wetlands? Did a century of siltation from the heavily worked foothills of the Soconusco flow down slope into these wetlands? What effects did this have on biotic communities, including human, in these spaces? Historically, did the export growers of the region adopt chemical inputs in the 1920s, as Lurtz's story comes to a close, like their counterparts in other locations? What effects might this have had on land, water, and bodies? Though largely unanswered, these questions are in their way still contributions in that Lurtz's foundational research makes it possible to ask. For environmental historians, *From the Grounds Up* challenges persistent assumptions

about the creation of export landscapes and offers a solid base from which to launch worthwhile future research.

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**Comments by Christopher Boyer, University of Illinois at Chicago**


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Years ago, I lamented at a Committee on Latin American History conference the decline of a sometimes tedious yet to my mind immensely valuable scholarly tool: the chapter, typically appearing just after the introduction, of Latin American history monographs written in the 1970s and 80s and penned by scholars influenced by the Annales School. The geographic overview chapter described the physical description of the book's setting, oftentimes complete with geomorphological data, details on rainfall, the courses of rivers, and sometimes even specific latitude and longitude coordinates. In essence, the complaint I articulated at the conference was that some historians honed in on social processes to the extent that it sometimes seemed as if geophysical space didn't matter. I worried that authors were too ready to give short shrift to the physical and geographical qualities that can help to give meaning to place. This lament is all the more true for studies that address what we might call productive ecosystems and plantation economies. How many studies of slavery in the sugar belt, I wondered, basically assume that there is no difference between the cane fields of Demerara and Trinidad? Or that corn production in the valley of Mexico functionally mirrors that of the Guatemalan highlands or the great northern deserts?

Casey Lurtz launches *From the Grounds Up* with a comprehensive reflection on place. She begins the book with a 7,000 year overview of the natural and human geography of the Soconusco, the southwestern region of Chiapas that borders the Suchiate River and once belonged to neighboring Guatemala. She paints a compelling picture of a region with its own multivalent geographic personality. To Lurtz's great credit, that sensibility of place suffuses the rest of the book, beginning with her observation that "The physical landscape of the Soconusco resisted incorporation into global markets" (33). Resisted, that is, until it became clear just how well suited its lands are for coffee production.

Lurtz shows that the advent of the coffee economy transformed the Soconusco into a multi-national landscape, one peopled not only by Mexicans but also by Germans, North Americans, British, Swiss, Gilbert Islanders, and others. As with so many other Mexican states, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there existed multiple and sometimes half-defined forms of land ownership, as well as differing ideas about the nature and legitimate means of acquiring real property. The result was cross-cutting claims to property and indeed incompatible notions of the legal and moral basis of landholding. In Lurtz's hands, the Soconusco becomes a social landscape every bit as complex as its ecological one.

*From the Grounds Up* also reveals that the Soconusco's character as a "remote" or "distant" frontier in geographic and economic terms was in many senses its defining characteristic. That began to change with the arrival of Matías Romero to the region in 1875, however. Romero, the polymath diplomat, Secretary of *Hacienda* (Economy), and economic cheerleader for southern Mexico, spent a two-year

sojourn in the Soconusco to supervise his coffee plantation and try to modernize the region's coffee industry generally, though he mainly succeeded in turning fellow planters against his meddlesome and self-righteous style of regional leadership. Still, from his perch as Secretario de Hacienda both before and after his Soconusco adventure, he served as one of the region's main boosters, extolling its unbounded natural wealth that only awaited those Men of Vision and Means willing to seize the day. Lurtz describes how Romero and other boosters rhetorically recast challenges to development such as wildly diverse and often remote terrain as strategic advantages that would ultimately favor development if used properly. She leaves us tantalized by the idea that while pretty speechifying is not enough to bring about major economic change on its own, the discourses used to describe and flog the agricultural potential of a land-in-settlement can have strong effects on how it is viewed and used.

Here we find another strength of the book: its attention to the political economy of development. Lurtz describes Romero's activities in great detail and then turns to an even greater driver of development (or under-development): the effects of insecure land tenure. This was a key issue in the Soconusco both because questions of ownership were not fully resolved on a local level characterized by social fluidity, and because Mexico's claims to sovereignty often ran up against Guatemalan aspirations to regain its former territory. Indeed, the lack of a clear national sovereignty or even a universally agreed upon international boundary drove much of the region's political and social history until the matter became (mostly) resolved in the 1880s. While insecurity created some opportunities to duck state bureaucracies, Lurtz shows that it also quashed some landholders' enthusiasm for investing in their property. That all changed when Porfirio Díaz came to office and political stability became the order of the day. Lurtz makes a particularly powerful argument about the multi-class process of economic development and eventual insertion into the global coffee markets that followed.

As is so often the case with excellent books, the strengths of *From the Grounds Up* sometimes leave the reader wanting more. For example, the deep ecology discussed in the early chapters fades as the book progresses. Even so, what can we learn about the co-evolution of the Soconusco and its human inhabitants in the very long run described in the early part of the book? In particular, are the coffee plantations of the nineteenth century in some non-trivial sense the extension of earlier human efforts to shape the land? By the same token, can we think of coffee plantations and those who tended them as actors not only within international markets, but drivers of anthropogenic change during the late nineteenth century? It will be interesting to see how Lurtz's work can contribute to the budding literature on the political ecology of development during the Porfiriato, and particularly how it might add to our understanding of *place* and the use of natural resources within neotropical ecosystems.

Like many excellent studies, the international market makes a repeated appearance in *From the Grounds Up*. But its presence – as landowners and workers no doubt

themselves experienced it in their own lives – was largely as an exogenous factor, a faceless force that structured the value of their product and labor but otherwise remained inscrutable and distant. Can we conceive of markets more as lived experiences, as an interface between the local and the non-local? Perhaps more to the point, how does the book allow us to begin to see markets as historical agents?

Finally, there remains the provocative question of Romero's role in all of this. Unlike a traditional captain of industry whose smoke-belching factories employed thousands and economically transformed urban and rural landscapes, Romero exercised much of his influence indirectly, from a desk in far-off Mexico City. But that does not mean that he did not leave an imprint on the Soconusco, whose natural wealth he never tired of promoting. But how can we assess this mediated developmentalism? How can we recruit Lurtz's reflections on political economy, including the role of land tenure, political policy, and law into other historical contexts in Mexico and beyond?

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**Response by Casey Marina Lurtz, Johns Hopkins University**

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What a privilege and a pleasure to have my book reviewed for H-Environment's roundtable series. Thank you to Kara Murphy Schlichting for proposing and organizing a roundtable, and to Gail Triner, Jennifer Eaglin, Timothy Lorek, and Chris Boyer for taking the time to read and review the book. I have such respect for these scholars of Latin America's environmental history, a field I readily admit to only recently moving into, and hope that I can do justice to their thoughtful questions, insights, and critiques. While *From the Grounds Up* may be out in the world and beyond my authorial tinkering at this point, I look forward to bringing their commentary to new projects that more deeply engage many of the issues they raise.

Each reviewer, in one way or another, raises a fundamental question about whether *From the Grounds Up* should or can be read as an environmental history. This is a question I also have, despite the phrase's inclusion in the back cover blurbs. I have taken to saying that the book is a history that is aware of the environment of the Soconusco, rather than a history of that environment. In much the same way, it is a book that is aware of rather than about gender or race or innumerable other facets of life. Lorek is generous enough to acknowledge that a book can only be about so much, but as this roundtable was commissioned for H-Enviro and scholars both within and outside the subfield of environmental history have recognized the influence of such literature on the book, the above sidestep deserves further explication.

This book grew out of my dissertation, which in turn grew out of a second-year seminar paper on what, at the time, I called the economic geography of labor in Chiapas. That paper, which provided the germ for Chapter 5 of the book, sought to connect the ways in which elites in different parts of the state were taking up (or not) new export crops to the ways in which they proposed reforming the state's indebted labor system at an agricultural congress called by the governor in 1896. The documents I relied on are well tread in the literature on nineteenth century Chiapas, but I thought to bring a new reading to them by engaging with the agricultural and economic terrain of the state. While the paper went over well with my advisors, when I shared it with an eminent scholar of Chiapas in Mexico City, his first question was whether I had actually trod these landscapes myself, rather than just retreading the sources.

The comment was made pointedly but kindly—I am so lucky to have found that the scholars who work in southernmost Mexico are, to a person, generous and welcoming—and shaped my approach from that moment onward. Thus, from the beginning, as I went in to the field to do archival research, this question of landscape and geography and place remained always in mind. I was not, though, in a graduate program nor in a scholarly community in Mexico that favored environmental history approaches. As Boyer and Lorek indicate, my academic genealogy is better tied to

the social histories of the 1970s and 1980s than to newer turns. And while that tradition embraced the careful elucidation of the geography, geology, etc. of place, it tended to do so as a means of scene setting rather than as an integrated, agentive factor in the history that followed. Boyer's ongoing call to better integrate this older scholarly trajectory with newer literature on environmental history is a welcome one and I hope that my book provides some suggestive if not yet coherent or conclusive enough models for doing so.

It was only late in the process of writing and revising, and truly only as I began to think more deeply about future projects, that I began to engage with environmental history literature. And as the book already required juggling literatures on politics, labor, capital and credit, state formation, and so on, explicit arguments about how the environment made this economy and how this economy remade the environment remained secondary. I could never leave place aside, particularly after heeding that early reprimand to go and tromp about the Soconusco and get to know its foothills and plains and rivers and gullies. I could never leave climate aside, particularly after spending months sweating in humid archives and jumping across the creeks that reappeared in the streets of Tapachula every day during the rainy season. And I sincerely hope that this sense of space and atmosphere permeate the book in a manner that makes clear that they matter. But I also readily acknowledge that I rarely pushed beyond this understanding to consider the consequences of the history I write on the landscape I engage.

H-Enviro's reviewers point to a multitude ways that histories of state formation and the expansion of export agriculture in Latin America, histories that anchor *From the Grounds Up*, ought to take up the tools and questions of environmental history going forward. Triner is right to see the book as a call for further comparative work, rather than a conclusive statement about how these two processes happened. I posit the Soconusco as an exaggerated but not exceptional case of a type of political and economic development that deserves more attention, both in terms of the diversity of actors involved in the processes and in their variable ways of approaching the challenges posed. The same could be said of what new export crops like coffee meant for Latin America's environmental outlook. In fact, coffee, in the same way it does for economic questions, represents a fruitful avenue for thinking about the variance in how new kinds of market production remade the agricultural landscapes Lorek asks me to address and the commodity and political frontiers Triner refers to. In Brazil, for example, coffee decimated forests as planters and their workers slashed and burned new territory in a continual push to expand rather than intensify production. On the other hand, coffee in the Soconusco, as I try to make clear, was never able to fully overtake the native forests. Primarily due to questions of labor, but also because of topography and property regimes, coffee, like cacao before it, facilitated the relative maintenance of tree cover and biodiversity. Institutions mattered when it came to resource extraction, as Triner gestures towards, but so too did the diverse cast of actors—people and agricultural goods both—involved in putting those institutions into practice.

Here, Eaglin's question about labor and the environment comes to the fore. As her own work suggests, the practices, habits, and preferences of migrant and local laborers had much to bear on the economic and environmental outcomes of market agriculture. While I wish I had done more to make clear the daily practices of those who cultivated coffee, both on plantations and on the small properties they called their own, I believe the book does suggest ways of thinking about how workers represent a key factor in ecological transformations. Migrant laborers' demands for lands to work for subsistence, local villagers' maintenance of multi-cropping and forest agriculture, and the settlement patterns of both groups that hedged plantation expansion by taking advantage of the region's difficult to survey terrain all shaped how the emerging coffee economy was able to expand and remake the Soconusco's landscape. In terms of the longer *durée* outcomes both Eaglin and Lorek ask about, the question of labor and the environment again rise to the top. New research increasingly shows that climate change is an important factor in Central American migration as increasingly unpredictable coffee harvests due to drought, flooding, and pests undermine the autonomies that the crop used to protect.

Finally, Boyer's overarching questions about the political ecology of development and the anthropogenic changes it drove are ones I am happy to see raised by my first book and happier still to leave for future work by both myself and others. As is often the case, writing this book left me with as many questions as answers. The idioms, practices, and ideologies of development that surrounded the building of the Soconusco's coffee economy struck me over and over in both their familiarity and their repetitiveness. As with the legal and economic institutions that undergirded the local economy's expansion, nineteenth-century *fomento*, or development, may have been generated and articulated by elites like Matías Romero but often meant little until a much more diverse cast of characters took it up and remade it to their own liking. My new work seeks to understand how a common repertoire of development emerged and circulated in post-independence Latin America and, most particularly, how it articulated a conceptualization of nature and the environment as connected to future national sovereignty and prosperity. This project is still nascent and amorphous, but it is motivated by exactly the sorts of questions Boyer poses in his review.

So, is *From the Grounds Up* an environmental history? I think it depends who reads it and how familiar they are with the field. To specialists, no, probably not. To those beyond the subfield, perhaps. Either way, I hope it provides an example of how the environment can and ought to be incorporated into histories most concerned with other matters. Few of us identify with solely one approach, one methodology, and the concerns and insights of environmental historians merit the attention of any scholar. Thank you again to this group of historians for taking the time to engage with my book and to H-Environment for embracing a work that does not sit squarely within its usual ambit.

## About the Contributors

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**Christopher Boyer** is Professor and Chair of History, and Professor of Latin American and Latino Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago. He teaches courses on social and environmental history of Modern Mexico and Latin America at UIC, and was visiting scholar at the UNAM in Spring of 2018. His most recent book, *Political Landscapes*, investigates social history of forest management in Mexico between 1880 and 2000, with special emphasis on the experiences of indigenous communities in Chihuahua and Michoacán. He has held Fulbright and NEH fellowships, as well as an Academy Fellowship from Harvard University. He co-edits a University of Arizona book series (with Lise Sedrez, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro) on Latin American environmental history.

**Jennifer Eaglin** is Assistant Professor of Environmental History/Sustainability at Ohio State University. Her work focuses on Brazilian sugar, development, and energy. Her book manuscript, *Sweet Fuel: The Social, Political, and Environmental History of Brazil's Sugar Ethanol Industry in Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo* (under contract with Oxford University Press), explores the history of sugar-based ethanol, government intervention, labor unrest, and environmental degradation linked to the industry's development over the course of the twentieth century.

**Tim Lorek** is an affiliated scholar with the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at the University of Michigan. He has a PhD in History from Yale University and has taught courses in Latin American and Environmental History at Yale, Brandeis University, and the University of Hartford. His book manuscript, *Making the Green Revolution: Agriculture and Conflicted Landscapes in Colombia*, is under contract with the University of North Carolina Press. He is also co-editor (with Andra B. Chastain) of *Itineraries of Expertise: Science, Technology, and the Environment in Latin America's Long Cold War* (forthcoming in March 2020 with University of Pittsburgh Press).

**Casey Marina Lurtz** is assistant professor of history at the Johns Hopkins University. Her work concerns conceptions of nature, land, and the economy in the 19th century, both in Mexico and throughout Latin America. Her recent book, *From the Grounds Up: Building an Export Economy in Southern Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 2019), is a history of how local and migrant villagers, plantation owners, and investors constrained and contributed to the emergence of a coffee economy at the turn of the twentieth century. Her new project, tentatively titled *Fomenting Development*, frames the emergence of development discourses in nineteenth-century Latin America as an exercise in asserting national sovereignty based in ecological extraction.

**Kara Murphy Schlichting** is an Assistant Professor of History at Queens College, City University of New York. Her work in late-19th and 20th-century American History sits at the intersection of urban, environmental, and political history. Her book *New York Recentered: Building the Metropolis from the Shore* (University of Chicago Press, 2019) is part of the press's History of Urban America series.

**Gail Triner** is Professor Emerita, Department of History, Rutgers University. She has published widely on Brazilian political economy history with respect to finance, iron ore and petroleum.

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