

The Political Ecology of Bananas: Contract Farming, Peasants and Agrarian Change in the Eastern Caribbean

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Abstract:

A review of *The Political Ecology of Bananas: Contract Farming, Peasants and Agrarian Change in the Eastern Caribbean* by Lawrence S. Grossman.

Keywords: Agriculture | Bananas | Production | Agri-business | Caribbean | Book Review

Article:

Studies using a political ecology framework provide a holistic understanding that integrate the environment, political, economic, and sociocultural factors. This complex and multifaceted approach has been getting more attention among social scientists. Grossman's book illustrates the importance of employing a political-ecology framework in furthering our understanding of contract farming in the Caribbean. His fieldwork in St. Vincent is a perfect setting for examining the banana industry among the Windward Islands (St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines [SVG], Dominica, and Grenada) and serves as an exemplar for contract farming and its impact on banana production, which has changed the nature of agriculture in the eastern Caribbean. Moreover, this work is particularly apropos given the current "Banana Wars" between the European Union (EU) and the United States. The two themes Grossman stresses are: "1. the critical role of the state—the British imperial policy directed at thwarting the power of the United States based Transnational Corporations (TNCs) involved in banana production in Latin America, and 2. Globalization in the form of the EU, Single European Market, World Trade Organization (supra-polities) toward trade liberalization"—all threatening the Windward Islands' banana production (p. 31). He points to three main forces shaping the banana industry and its system of contract farming: capital represented by Geest Industries, the state in the form of the

St. Vincent and Grenadines and British Government, and the physical environment. He illustrates the effects of these forces by examining the impacts on access to labor, local food production, and the physical environment.

In theory, contract farming solves many of the problems inherent in both open-market sales and vertical integration. As Grossman describes, the system has potential advantages for both sellers and buyers. Farmers benefit from a guaranteed market, which reduces the uncertainty associated with the wide demand fluctuations of open markets. Buyers benefit from reduced risks associated with production, for a number of the risks are diverted to the farmer by way of contract agreements. Moreover, "contract farming does not exclude on the basis of farm-size"—small and large-scale producers can get a banana contract. However, contract farming does not translate into equal playing fields between banana growers and buyers.

In Grossman's historical analysis of Geest Industries, a TNC, we learn about the great lengths to which Geest went to protect themselves over the last fifty years. During this time Geest depended on the Windward Island banana industry for its wealth. Geest Industries was the exclusive marketer of Windward Island bananas from 1952 to 1995, and has been the largest importer of bananas into Britain from the 1970s through the early 1990s (p. 65). Geest guaranteed to purchase all export-quality bananas, and the emphasis clearly was on quality production and packaging. Quite appropriately, Grossman is highly critical of the arrangement Geest established with the Banana Growers' Association and individual growers. While growers were gradually taking on all the responsibilities of planting, harvesting, and packing, as well as the financial risks of production and distribution, Geest was lessening theirs. Moreover, growers were not paid their percentage share from their harvest until after their boxes of bananas arrived safely in England and again were graded on inspection. Geest deducted growers' costs of inputs and transportation fees assessed from St. Vincent to England. The Banana Growers' Associations (BGAs) were also paid after these deductions. As a consequence, the island BGA's were financially weak and could not afford a sufficient number of extension agents to support the more than 12,000 listed banana growers. The relationship between Geest and banana growers was asymmetrical with the contract serving mainly to control banana extraction.

From Grossman's in-depth historical context we better understand the current Banana Wars between the EU and the US, and the implication they have for the Caribbean islands. The international banana trade has had significant influence on Windward Island banana production. In the United Kingdom Geest is the largest importer, representing 4 percent of world trade. International banana trade and distribution have been protected by policies supporting tariffs and import licenses. The UK has protected its banana trade with the Windward Islands with tariffs and import licenses, which restricted banana supplies from non-Commonwealth areas, especially Central American "dollar bananas." Since the 1950s, the British Government promoted their investors and has since tried to maintain that arrangement. However, since restructuring in the late 1980s and again in the mid-1990s, in conjunction with the devaluation of the pound sterling, Windward Island banana growers are struggling to hold on to their place in the export market.

Grossman challenges Braverman's nineteenth-century deskilling of labor and production in craft manufacturing and Taylor's twentieth-century management strategies in analyzing contract farming and its application to the banana industry. Grossman's detailed analysis of the labor

skills needed in banana production, management, and packaging clearly illustrates the inappropriateness of these concepts. In fact, he discusses at length the tremendous and varied skills required of the contract farmers because of the rapidly changing market and increased competition from the dollar banana producers. In addition, he also suggests that concepts such as "disguised wage labor" are equally inappropriate for understanding the position of the laborer in banana production in St. Vincent, for many banana growers work their own or rented lands. From his literature review Grossman has found similar contract farming examples from Kenya, Thailand and the Sahel, illustrating that SVG is not an idiosyncratic case.

With respect to the labor question, Grossman focuses on "the extent and import of control exercised by capital and the state over the farmers and the labor process" (p.3). Over the past fifty years there has been an increasing dependency on Geest Industries to support the banana industry, the state, the BGA, and the growers. Geest, the BGAs, and later the suprapolities, became more controlling of the growers, creating very rigid harvesting and packaging procedures. According to his research in the Res tin Hill community in SVG, growers do not always comply with regulations and standards, for it is too costly and the economic incentives no longer exist. Grossman reveals some growers may sell their fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides, subsidized by the state and Geest for banana use, to supplement their incomes. Moreover, farmers are trying to find ways to cut corners to meet their increasing labor demands to produce "quality" bananas. Increasingly, families have turned to household labor of all ages for assistance.

Grossman explores the "food question" by examining "the impact of contract farming for export of domestic food production, food imports and dependency" (p. 3). He provides a broad overview from the colonial era of slavery (1640s) to the days of proto-peasants and post-emancipation to contextualize banana production in the Windward Islands. This historical context provides the background explaining the transformation of land use and land tenure during the colonial era to the present, concentrating on the production of sugar, arrowroot, cotton, ground provisions, and bananas (omitting *ganja*) as leading income-generating activities for SVG and for the region. The analysis illustrates how bananas have become one of the island's largest legal income-generating agricultural commodities. At the heart of these agrarian transformations Grossman points to the shifting role of the state, capital, and the transnational corporation—Geest.

Grossman contends that the decline in domestic food suppliers is related to two major factors: capital and the state. These factors are undermining the local food production system by increasing competition for export production and displacing land and labor previously devoted to local food crop production (p.3). He finds that local farmers cannot compete with subsidized, low-cost food imports, and consequently SVG's agricultural lands and labor have been primarily directed toward monoculture of bananas for export rather than to local food crops, especially in the central and eastern portion of the island.

Grossman turns to regulation theory and links it to the post-Fordist era of globalization to explain some of the agrarian changes taking place in commodity production, land use and land tenure. However, Grossman finds that borrowing Fordist Regulation theory from industry is

inappropriate in understanding the increased dependency on bananas as the region's export crop. Regulation theory, he notes, "explains how a Ford tractor got to the field, but it doesn't explain Fordism in the field" (p. 12). Commodity production on an assembly line is not the same as cultivating fresh fruit and vegetables in the field. Labor needs and skills differ greatly as he points out.

Lastly, Grossman examines the "environmental question," linking intensive agrochemical use in contract banana farming to associated environmental consequences. He contends, that producing bananas in the Caribbean environment is risky business given the prevalence of hurricanes, droughts, tropical storms, seasonal rainfall fluctuations, winds, and volcanic eruptions. Bananas suffer through these environmental extremes that also create a natural environment conducive to disease, weeds, fungi, and pests that regularly attack the banana plant. Nevertheless, Grossman focuses on the impact contract banana farming has on the environment primarily in the context of agrochemical use, misuse, and overuse. From this discussion we learn how the regular use of agrochemicals has influenced labor needs and polluted waters. Today's banana production differs from that of years past in that the increased use of herbicides and pesticides has led to diminishing inter-cropping; growers use agrochemicals rather than hiring labor to clean fields of unwanted weeds and eliminating opportunities for inter cropping food crops. Grossman finds that Geest provided and required the agro-chemicals used by banana growers as part of the planting package they must subscribe to as a contract farmer.

Moreover, while growers were battling these local environmental conditions, food quality guidelines for export increased over the years with international appearance standards becoming more rigid. As Grossman points out, Geest and SVG responded to the higher quality standards by encouraging growers to increase their use of agrochemicals to "control" plant disease, disease and infestation to meet food quality. Grossman provides a lengthy discussion about growers' use of agrochemicals and Geest's supplying them, but nothing about state intervention and reduction of the type or amount brought onto the island. There was also little discussion of the impact long-term exposure to these agrochemicals—most of which are banned from use in the US—has on the farmers and their families, especially now that more children are involved in the harvesting and packing process. Nevertheless, Grossman articulates through a political ecology perspective the control capital and the state have over the growers. Clearly, Geest had structured a system where contract farming relied on intensive use of agrochemicals; their use is encouraged to produce quality bananas that satisfy the global market, not the local one. In the end growers, the environment, laborers, and Vincentians paid dearly.

Anthropologists will find that this book is not an ethnography. Although a considerable amount of his information about banana cultivation techniques comes from living among Restin Hill residents, one still gets the sense people are missing as is the culture surrounding production and the impact policies (international and national) have had on the daily lives of the growers and the island. In the entire book there are only two quotes from growers. In addition many readers will disagree with Grossman's use of the word "peasants" in relation to banana growers. Not all farmers/ growers are peasants and not all peasants are farmers/ growers. I find the term antiquated and not useful, especially since he is not consistent in its use. Although the majority of the banana growers in SVG cultivate on 5 to 10 acres of land, not all are full-time growers.

Many of these cultivators engage in other part-time wage earning activities. Thus, Grossman's use of the term peasant when applied to contract farmers in the Caribbean seems inappropriate.

Over all, this book will be useful for those wishing to add to their knowledge of contract farming or banana production from a political ecology perspective. Grossman's detailed history of the rise and fall of the Banana Growers' Association, Geest, the state, and the emergence of EU, as well as the great detail on banana cultivation that highlights the skills involved in planting, harvesting and packaging, clearly link policy, economics, and the physical environment to production.