

REVIEW: *A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF COFFEE AND CAFÉS*

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We do not know the origins of coffee as a human drink and have to make do with an old story about a goatherd who noticed one of his animals dancing one night. What we know today is that it has worked its way up to a multi-billion dollar global industry that fuels everything from late night marathon sessions for creative types to binge-watching fans. So, if you want a solid general presentation of the history of all that written by an enthusiastic amateur, this book is for you. Otherwise, there are problems.

The first thing a serious academic reader will notice is the lack of citations. There are no parentheses, no footnotes, and not even a bibliography. The publisher has set up a [website](#) for those things, but it feels like a cumbersome solution to a problem the author and publisher created. Indeed, the author and publisher are the same person, which may explain how so many typos remain in the final text. It is quite bad enough that the author is an American trying to sound British, but that only adds to the typographical mess.

As to content, it is difficult to take the measure of this book for the above-mentioned reasons. But one thing in particular stands out. For a “people’s history,” this text mostly ignores the people at the bottom of the chain of coffee production, the people in the fields doing their best to make a go of things. After the book finishes the period of Ottoman

domination of the coffee trade, these people are mentioned very little. Where they do get noticed, the text feels like so much bourgeois faux leftist pearl-clutching rather than an expression of genuine concern. At the other end of the scale, the author on one page exposes the official lies of companies like Starbucks only to excuse them on the next.

The author also promises to present many strands of caffeinated history and to weave them together. While there are strands aplenty, there is very little weaving.

The classism, racism, and general coffee snobbery found throughout the text only add to the difficulty of appreciating what might have otherwise been an excellent addition to the field of people’s history. Again, read this book if you want an un-challenging general history of coffee and cafés, but this is not a work for serious scholars.

Reference

Biderman, Bob. *A People’s History of Coffee and Cafés*. London: Black Apollo Press, 2013.