
There is an urgent need for books like Stuart McCook’s Coffee Is Not Forever. Even as people are more attuned than ever before to the grim realities of a pandemic amidst the constant, rapid ricochet of human bodies around the planet, many remain unaware of the epidemics that rage among our most essential companion species—that is, among domesticated crops and livestock. It is possible that zoonotic diseases will garner greater attention thanks to desperate curiosity about the origins of SARS-CoV-2. Meanwhile, plant diseases will go on multiplying, with their sustained discussion unlikely outside agroindustry and agronomy. McCook’s timely study makes clear the consequences of collective blindness to these ever-present epidemics in his globe-spanning, 150-year history of Hemileia vastatrix. That is the fungus responsible for coffee leaf rust, a disease for which there is no cure. The measures that have been, and still are being, taken to keep your morning coffee affordable and palatable in light of the rust might provide as much of a jolt as the java itself.

Coffee was an established global commodity well before the first outbreak of the rust in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1869—as had to be the case because it was the conditions of mass production, which usually profited individuals who were not themselves farmers, that generated the ecological conditions in which rust could truly thrive. After a
brief glance at coffee’s early history as a local and then regional product, *Coffee Is Not Forever* immerses the reader in successive ecologies of coffee production and rust prevention. In concise, readable, informative chapters, McCook details imperial plantation cultivation of arabica beans in Ceylon, where the impulse to grow more beans pushed production into climates favorable to rust, and then follows the disease to plantations elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific in the early twentieth century, where surging interest in the less tasty, but more hearty, robusta coffee salvaged production for a time. The story moves next to colonial Africa, where the rust defined the contours of expanding plantation production and ends up in Latin America to witness evangelism for “technification” during the Cold War and since.

At each stopover on this global journey, McCook directs attention to two distinct, but interrelated, ecologies. First, there is that of the disease, understood as an interaction of the fungal pathogen *H. vastatrix*, its coffee host, and the surrounding environment as shaped by climate, agricultural practices, public policies, and economic exigencies. Second, there is the ecology of scientific research—that is, the interactions of organisms, experts, and knowledge in experiment stations and research laboratories. As McCook persuasively argues, the industrial coffee–coffee rust ecosystem keeps delivering the beans that consumers demand thanks to institutional assemblages that foster coffee research, disseminate control techniques, and produce more resilient plants.

Should we be happy about this outcome? McCook is not so cruel as to give his readers indigestion over their coffee habits, though he certainly could if he wanted. As he points out, consumers have not ever really borne the costs of the rust, not even the Big Rust outbreak that has decimated production in Latin America in the past decade. Nor has agribusiness been unduly burdened. As with almost any disruption in agriculture in modern history, smallholder farmers and farm laborers have been the ones to bear the brunt of the economic and environmental catastrophes unleashed by coffee leaf rust outbreaks.

McCook’s take-home message is the one telegraphically delivered in the title—namely, that we cannot expect coffee production to continue in its current trajectory. He sustains this message through a clear presentation of how industrial monocultures of global commodities provide ideal conditions for diseases like coffee leaf rust to flourish and of the temporariness of scientific fixes within the agroindustrial system. Perhaps surprisingly, he avoids scathing critique of that system. “[W]e cannot take coffee—or any of our crops—for granted,” writes McCook. “New diseases and pests, and new strains of established diseases and pests, are on the move. Once established, they are difficult to eradicate. And their impact is cumulative” (p. 205). As individuals the world over grapple with the nature and
costs of new diseases, the time may be right to see disease vulnerabilities and their devastating consequences at work in the very meat and potatoes that sustain us, and in our coffee addictions, too.

Helen Anne Curry
University of Cambridge
doi: 10.1093/envhis/emaa037