

Review: Augustine Sedgewick's 'Coffeeland'

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Four hundred years ago, *Coffea arabica*, a tropical shrub bearing glossy green leaves and bright-red berries, was virtually unknown outside of the Arab world and the corner of Ethiopia where it had been discovered in the ninth century—by a goatherd who, legend has it, noticed that his animals would get frisky and stay up all night after nibbling its berries. In the years since people figured out that coffee could affect us in similar ways, the plant has done a great deal for our species, and our species in turn has done a great deal for the plant. We have given it more than 27 million acres of new habitat all around the world, assigned 25 million farming families to its care and feeding, and bid up its price until it became one of the most valuable globally traded crops. Not bad for a shrub that is neither edible nor particularly beautiful or easy to grow.

Coffee owes its global ascendancy to a fortuitous evolutionary accident: The [chemical compound that the plant makes to defend itself against insects](#) happens to alter human consciousness in ways we find desirable, making us more energetic and industrious—and notably better workers. That chemical of course is caffeine, which is now the world's most popular psychoactive drug, used daily by [80 percent of humanity](#). (It is [the only such drug](#) we [routinely give to our children](#), in the form of soda.) Along with the tea plant, which produces the same compound in its leaves, coffee has helped create exactly the kind of world that coffee needs to thrive: a world driven by consumer capitalism, ringed by global trade, and dominated by a species that can now barely get out of bed without its help.

The effects of caffeine mesh with the needs of capitalism in myriad ways. Before the arrival of coffee and tea in the West in the 1600s, alcohol—which was [more sanitary than water](#)—was the drug that dominated, and fogged, human minds. This might have been acceptable, even welcome, when work meant physical labor performed out of doors (beer breaks were common), but alcohol's effects became a problem when work involved machines or numbers, as more and more of it did.

[From April 2020: Maya MacGuineas on capitalism's addiction problem](#)

Enter coffee, a drink that not only was safer than beer and wine (among other things, the water it was made with had to be boiled) but turned out to [improve performance and stamina](#). In 1660, only a few years after coffee became available in England, one observer noted:

'Tis found already, that this coffee drink hath caused a greater sobriety among the Nations. Whereas formerly Apprentices and clerks with others used to take their morning's draught of Ale, Beer, or Wine, which, by the dizziness they Cause in the Brain, made many unfit for business, they use now to play the Good-fellows in this wakeful and civil drink.

"This wakeful and civil drink" also freed us from the circadian rhythms of our body, helping to stem the natural tides of exhaustion so that we might work longer and later hours; along with the advent of artificial light, caffeine abetted capitalism's conquest of night. It's probably no coincidence that the minute hand on clocks arrived at roughly the same historical moment as coffee and tea did, when work was moving indoors and being reorganized on the principle of the clock.

The intricate synergies of coffee and capitalism form the subtext of the historian Augustine Sedgewick's

thoroughly engrossing first book, *Coffeeland: One Man's Dark Empire and the Making of Our Favorite Drug*. At the center of Sedgewick's narrative is James Hill, an Englishman born in the slums of industrial Manchester in 1871 who, at 18, sailed for Central America to make his fortune. There, he built a coffee dynasty by refashioning the Salvadoran countryside in the image of a Manchester factory. Hill became the head of one of the "Fourteen Families" who controlled the economy and politics of El Salvador for much of the 20th century; at the time of his death, in 1951, his 18 plantations employed some 5,000 people and produced more than 2,000 tons of export-ready coffee beans from more than 2,500 acres of rich soil on the slopes of the Santa Ana volcano. For many years, much of what Hill (or rather his workers) produced ended up in the familiar red tins of Hills Brothers coffee.

"What does it mean to be connected to faraway people and places through everyday things?" Sedgewick asks in his early pages. *Coffeeland* offers a fascinating meditation on that question, by rendering once-obscure lines of connection starkly visible.

Filling those cans of Hills Brothers coffee involved a few different forms of brutality. Because growing coffee requires a tremendous amount of labor—for planting, pruning, picking, and processing—a planter's success depends on finding enough people in the countryside willing to work. The essential question facing any would-be capitalist, as Sedgewick reminds us, has always and ever been "What makes people work?"

Chattel slavery had provided a good answer for Brazil's coffee farmers, but by the time Hill arrived in El Salvador, in 1889, slave labor was no longer an option. A smart and unsentimental businessman, Hill understood that he needed wage labor, lots of it, and as a son of the Manchester slums, he knew that the best answer to the question of what will make a person work was in fact simple: hunger.

There was only one problem. Rural Salvadorans, most of whom were Indians called "mozos," weren't hungry. Many of them farmed small plots of communally owned land on the volcano, some of the most fertile in the country. This would have to change if El Salvador was to have an export crop. So at the behest of the coffee planters and in the name of "development," the government launched a program of land privatization, forcing the Indians to either move to more marginal lands or find work on the new coffee plantations.

[Read: Caffeine, the world's most popular drug](#)

Actually the choice wasn't initially quite so stark. Even the lands newly planted with coffee still offered plenty of free food for the picking. "Veins of nourishment"—in the form of cashews, guavas, papayas, jocotes, figs, dragon fruits, avocados, mangoes, plantains, tomatoes, and beans—"ran through the coffee monoculture, and wherever there was food, however scant, there was freedom, however fleeting, from work," Sedgewick writes. The planters' solution to this "problem"—the problem of nature's bounty—was to eliminate from the landscape any plant that was not coffee, creating an ever more totalitarian monoculture in which nothing else was permitted to grow. When a chance avocado tree did manage to survive in some overlooked corner, the campesino caught tasting its fruit would be accused of theft and beaten if he was lucky, or shot if he was not. Thus was the concept of private property impressed upon the Indians.

In Sedgewick's words, "What was needed to harness the will of the Salvadoran people to the production of

coffee, beyond land privatization, was the plantation's production of hunger itself." James Hill did the math and found that workers showed up most promptly and worked most diligently if he paid them partly in cash—15 cents a day for women and double that for men—and partly in food: breakfast and lunch, which consisted of two tortillas topped with as many beans as could be balanced on them. (The local diet became as monotonous as the landscape.) Hill thus transformed thousands of subsistence farmers and foragers into wage laborers, extracting quantities of surplus value that would be the envy of any Manchester factory owner.

The whole notion of surplus value of course is Karl Marx's and, as Sedgewick points out, emerged from Marx and Friedrich Engels's analysis of industrial capitalism in James Hill's birthplace. Communism was another Manchester export that found its way to Santa Ana, this one arriving during the Great Depression, when coffee prices collapsed and unemployed coffee workers could no longer eat from the land. It turns out that leftists were also able "to transform hunger into power." The climax of Sedgewick's narrative comes in the early 1930s, when thousands of *mozos*, organized by homegrown Communists who had spent time abroad, rose up against the coffee barons, seizing plantations and occupying town halls.

Revolution was afoot, at least until 1932, when the Salvadoran government, again at the behest of the coffee planters, launched a vicious counterinsurgency. Rounding up anyone who looked like an Indian, soldiers herded them into town squares and then opened fire with machine guns. The government's campaign against the coffee workers came to be known as *La Matanza*—"The Massacre"—and its memory burns bright in the Salvadoran countryside. When El Salvador erupted for a second time half a century later, the coffee barons were under siege again; James Hill's grandson, Jaime Hill, was kidnapped by rebels and held for a multimillion-dollar ransom, which the family had no trouble paying.

I'm making Sedgewick's story sound more schematic than it really is. Though his analysis of coffee's political economy does owe a debt to Marx, his literary gifts and prodigious research make for a deeply satisfying reading experience studded with narrative surprise. Sedgewick has a knack for the sparkling digression and arresting jump cut, hopping back and forth between El Salvador and the wider world, where coffee was being consumed in ever-increasing quantities. He is especially good on the marketing of coffee to Americans, going back to independence, when [the country broke from England's tea habit and drinking coffee became a patriotic act](#). He shows how coffee has long been promoted in America less as a tasty beverage or pleasurable experience than as a means to an end: "a form of instant energy—a work drug."

American scientists studied coffee intensively in the early years of the 20th century, seeking to understand how a beverage that contained virtually no calories could nevertheless supply energy to the human animal, seemingly in violation of the laws of thermodynamics. Coffee had the extraordinary ability to generate surplus value not only in its production but in its consumption as well, as an episode in the history of the coffee break makes clear.

Sedgewick tells the story of a small Denver necktie maker called Los Wigwam Weavers. When the company lost its best young male loom operators to the war effort in the early 1940s, the owner, Phil Greinetz, hired older men to replace them, but they lacked the dexterity needed to weave the intricate patterns in Wigwam's ties. Next he hired middle-aged women, and while they could produce ties to his standards, they lacked the

stamina to work a full shift. When Greinetz called a company-wide meeting to discuss the problem, his employees had a suggestion: Give us a 15-minute break twice a day, with coffee.

Greinetz instituted the coffee breaks and immediately noticed a change in his workers. The women began doing as much work in six and a half hours as the older men had done in eight. Greinetz made the coffee breaks compulsory, but he decided he didn't need to pay his workers for the half hour they were on break. This led to a suit from the Department of Labor and, eventually, to a 1956 decision by a federal appeals court that enshrined the coffee break in American life. The court ruled that because the coffee breaks "promote more efficiency and result in a greater output," they benefited the company as much as the workers and should therefore be counted as work time. As for the phrase *coffee break*, it entered the vernacular through a 1952 advertising campaign by the Pan-American Coffee Bureau, a trade group organized by Central American growers. Their slogan: "Give yourself a coffee-break ... and get what coffee gives to you."

[Read: The case for drinking as much coffee as you like](#)

Near the end of *Coffeeland*, Sedgewick attempts to quantify exactly how much value a pound of coffee gives an employer (or, put another way, extracts from an employee), using Los Wigwam and Hill's plantation as examples. He estimates that it takes 1.5 hours of Salvadoran labor to produce a pound of coffee. That's enough to make 40 cups of coffee, or supply two coffee breaks for Wigwam's 20 employees, which Greinetz calculated yielded the equivalent of 30 additional hours of labor. In other words, the six cents that Hill's plantation paid for an hour and a half of labor in 1954 was transformed into \$22.50 worth of value for Phil Greinetz, an alchemy that reflects both the remarkable properties of caffeine and the brute facts of exploitation.

But the symbiotic relationship that coffee and capitalism have enjoyed for the past several centuries may now be coming to a [sad close](#). *Coffea arabica* is a picky plant, willing to grow only in the narrowest range of conditions: Sunlight, water, drainage, and even altitude all have to be just so. The world has only so many places suitable for coffee production. Climate scientists estimate that at least half of the acreage now producing coffee—and [an even greater proportion in Latin America](#)—will be unable to support the plant by 2050, making coffee one of the crops [most immediately endangered by climate change](#). Capitalism may be killing the golden goose.

Yet capitalism is nothing if not resourceful. Employers who now offer coffee breaks might, someday soon, instead hand out tablets of synthetic caffeine, one in the morning, another in the afternoon. This would offer the employer several advantages. Pills are cheaper than coffee, and less messy. And because they take mere seconds to ingest, the coffee break itself would no longer be necessary, giving the company every reason to claw back the 30 precious minutes the courts bequeathed to the American worker 64 years ago. The fate of the coffee workers in El Salvador will likely be far worse, but perhaps the "veins of nourishment"—nature's edible bounty—will flow again after the monocultures of coffee collapse.

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By Augustine Sedgewick

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