

**Political Ecology, Mountain Agriculture, and Knowledge in Honduras, by Kees Jansen (1998), Amsterdam: Thela Publishers, 288 pp.**

**Reviewed by Michael Paolisso, Department of Anthropology, University of Maryland.**

This book is about agriculture and environmental deterioration in El Zapote (fictitious name), a village in the municipality of Santa Bárbara, Honduras. Jansen's central argument is that land-degrading agricultural practices on the hillsides surrounding El Zapote and, by extension, other poor rural areas in Central America - is not simply the result of poverty, ignorance, population pressures, and/or modernization imposed by external capitalist development. Rather, environmental degradation must be seen within a broad social context that includes local patterns of access to resources, forms of state intervention, the heterogeneous paths of technological change and knowledge generation, divisions of labor, and the specific interactions of emerging commodity markets and the organization of production.

For Jansen, what must be explained are the social practices of producers across time and space. Producers do not respond simply as individual actors to their natural environment or to economic and political imperatives. Instead, their agricultural and environmental responses are created by and in turn recreate institutionalized social practices. Through an in-depth study of the social practices, institutions and structures that articulate economic, technological, political and environmental change in one village, with a focus on producer strategies, macro level processes and macro theories on nature/environment and society/culture can be tested.

Throughout the book, Jansen successfully integrates theory and ethnography. Although the book is ostensibly about mountain agriculture and environment in Honduras, it also provides a useful critique of contemporary theories of development and environmental degradation and current approaches in political ecology. Although the discussion is at times dense, with effort and follow up with references cited, readers relatively unfamiliar with existing models of causes of environmental degradation can gain a good grounding in the various theoretical perspectives. At the same time, one gains ground-level insights on how farmers in El Zapote respond to changing material (ecological), social, economic and political processes as they struggle to grow corn and beans for home consumption, raise some livestock and grow coffee on small plots in order to earn needed income. Jansen is to be commended for integrating theory and ethnography throughout, which broadens the appeal and usefulness of the book, and provides the data on the degree to which the local can explain the macro.

Focusing on the book's many theoretical arguments, only a few of which can be mentioned here, Jansen situates producer rationality within social relations and structures that have evolved historically and continue to adapt to a dynamic and complex local setting. He argues quite convincingly that macro-level theories linking land use to capital accumulation and capital relations of production, social differentiation, and functional-dualistic models (i.e., "modern" versus "traditional" sectors) are individually and collectively insufficient to account for the diversity of farmer responses to environmental degradation in El Zapote.

Equally insufficient, in Jansen's view, are approaches that give primary emphasis to the role

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of individual farmer knowledge, perceptions, values and agency. While not dismissing the importance of macro structural processes and cultural knowledge domains, Jansen's core theoretical argument is that humans are active subjects who transform social structures themselves. In fact, human agency is defined as the capacity to reproduce multiple social structures that offer resources and constraints to producers. Capitalist relations of production are not fixed structures impervious to local level adaptation, variation and manipulation, and human agency is not only about individual rational choice and adaptive behavior.

One need not completely agree with Jansen about the primary role of historical and socio-political structures at the local level in explaining environmental degradation to appreciate the value of incorporating local social processes and structures into our analysis of environmental degradation. Here, the ethnographic material he provides is insightful and convincing. For example, Jansen describes the historical process of land titling in El Zapote, with all its contested domains and discourses and uncertainties. Through life histories, Jansen reveals that each plot, whether owned or rented, has a history of use and ownership that links the local with supralocal socio-economic processes and institutions. As a result, what farmers see as "good land" is based on much more than agronomic factors of soil fertility, slope, structure of existing fallow vegetation or even economic factors such as distance and expected yield. "Good land" also depends on the social and political history of that individual plot: whether the land is contested with an individual or surrounding neighbors, which could lead to crop theft or destroyed fences, or conversely, whether the plot, if rented from a wealthier farmer, warrants above-normal labor inputs in order to increase the likelihood of future access to the plot. Also at least in part a result of these socio-historical processes, land value is always dynamic, and includes an assessment of the production and labor processes between villagers and sometimes beyond. Land tenure is very much about social struggles and social differentiations.

The focus on socialized agency and process leads to a view of farmers as active strategists, and not the passive adapters that modernization theories would suggest. Farmer agency mediates the effects of environment (the material conditions of temperature, soil qualities, rainfall, etc.), new technologies, and markets on local level socio-economic processes. Different farmers define and operationalize their objectives and farm management practices based on different criteria, interests, experiences and perspectives. Over time, they develop specific projects and ways of farming, making it impossible to talk of the average or modal farmer. Certainly environmental heterogeneity and climatic uncertainty condition individual actor strategies, and variability in yields is a logical outcome of this heterogeneity.

In El Zapote, most farmers are resource poor and cannot, to any significant degree, control many crucial characteristics of the environment according to their will. Farmers recognize this, which is why many find it difficult to predict yields and to articulate those production strategies that generate good yields. Thus, adaptation to environmental variability is focused on manipulating or controlling key social relations and institutions linked to labor processes and allocations, whether it be through use of household labor, wage labor or reciprocal exchanges. Success in utilization of available labor is a primary avenue to local capital accumulation. This helps to create what Jansen describes as "nickel and dime capitalism," villagers related to each other through forms of small exploitation. The result is an internally differentiated community through which adoptions of agricultural practices of environmental significance are affected. Relations between farmers will allow some to accumulate capital and reassure their reproduction, while others will remain resource poor.

Finally, Jansen's focus on the political and social context leads to a position that there is no such thing as "pure" local knowledge. Rather, knowledge is socially constructed and differentiated. Farmer knowledge of the consequences of burning is an example. Jansen argues there is no one local, shared knowledge domain regarding burning. Farmers can articulate the pros and cons of burning, and rationalize their own choices depending on the specific mix of environmental, economic, and socio-political factors in which their own agricultural practices are situated. Depending on the individual's social and political position, s/he will have differential

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access to the knowledge and resources that will ultimately influence the decision to burn or not, and eventually affect social meaning of burning.

The book's theoretical contributions should not overshadow the book's strong qualitative and ethnographic contributions. Jansen's long-term fieldwork in El Zapote and his use of different field methods provide a rich and informative account of human side of agriculture and environment in El Zapote. His historical work is particularly insightful and adds a much needed time depth to the book.

Ethnographically, the book is important because of its concern with social life in the hinterlands and the role of coffee and cattle, particularly for mountain areas. The book highlights that we need to know more about the local dynamics of coffee production, particularly how environmental and socio-economic factors articulate.

In this book, Jansen has successfully integrated complex theory with complex ethnographic processes. His focus has been to understand both local farming practices and environmental transformations, while providing a "grounded" alternative to a number of macro-level theories that posit the primacy of dominant, single explanatory factors to account for environmental degradation. While one can disagree with the importance given particular socio-political processes or histories, in terms of affecting individual agriculture and environmental behavior, depending the ethnographic specifics, one cannot dismiss the importance of social relations, structures and histories, constructed and reconstructed at the local level. Also, it may be the case that local knowledge may have more of a shared pattern, and that more extensive quantitative data might provide insights on patterns of production linked to producers' models of agricultural and environmental processes.

Still, the book provides a well-articulated argument for grounding our theories of environmental degradation in the local particulars, and it does so without losing sight of the theoretical parameters. Jansen makes this especially clear in the book's final section, where he offers well-reasoned and thoughtful suggestions for moving "post political ecologies" beyond overly relativistic and discursive analyses. As he argues, a "realist political ecology" must incorporate the material realities that confront farmers in El Zapote. Although multiple meanings and interpretations arise out of discourse and socio-political processes, these interpretations are also affected by "real-world" material/environmental processes that are of concern to El Zapote farmers, environmentalists and conservationists alike. Recognition of this has less to do with modernity and post-modernity, or structural versus post-structural, and more to do with an acknowledgment that real-world ecological processes are generative of meaning along with our socio-cultural processes, and that a political ecology capable of bridging the divide between social and natural sciences in the study of environmental degradation must include the material and a variety of theoretical perspectives.

**Chinnagounder's Challenge: The Question of Ecological Citizenship (1999),  
by Deane Curtin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, xviii, 218 pp.**

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