NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CENTRAL AMERICAN HISTORY, 1838–1945

David Kaimowitz
Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture

LAS REPUBLICAS AGROEXPORTADORAS (1870–1945). Edited by Victor Hugo Acuña Ortega. Second edition. (San José: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1994. Pp. 452.)

HISTORIA ECONOMICA Y SOCIAL DE COSTA RICA (1750–1950). By Victor Hugo Acuña Ortega and Iván Molina Jiménez. (San José: Porvenir, 1991. Pp. 214.)

CENTRAL AMERICA SINCE INDEPENDENCE. Edited by Leslie Bethell. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Pp. 366. $54.95 cloth, $18.95 paper.)

TIERRA, CAFE Y SOCIEDAD. Edited by Héctor Pérez Brignoli and Mario Samper. (San José: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1994. Pp. 588.)

GUATEMALA: LINAJE Y RACISMO. By Marta Casaus Arzú. (San José: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1992. Pp. 356.)

Anyone seriously interested in understanding recent events in Central America must sooner or later come to grips with the legacy of the period between the collapse of the Federación Centroamericana in 1838 and the end of World War II. The current political regimes, agrarian structures, social classes, and patterns of agricultural production and trade in the region can be traced back largely to that period.

During the 1970s, authors such as Edelberto Torres Rivas (1971), Jaime Wheelock Román (1975), and Rafael Menjívar (1980) set forth a compelling vision of the period that emphasized how the "liberal reforms" and the incorporation of Central America into the world market through the export of coffee and bananas laid the foundations for dependent capitalist development. This process was presented as characterized by the formation of strong central governments controlled by capitalist elites, rapid privatization of agricultural land and the disappearance of indigenous communities, increasing proletarianization of the labor force combined with the frequent use of forced labor, and fast-paced export-oriented growth. According to this perspective on Central American history, the indigenous communities strongly resisted loss of their land and

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the imposition of forced labor but were soon overcome by superior government forces (Wheelock 1981). The endless conflicts between the Liberal and Conservative parties throughout the nineteenth century have been portrayed as struggles between modern ("progressive") capitalist elites interested in promoting coffee and traditional precapitalist colonial oligarchies that were tied to cattle production, commercial monopolies, and the Catholic Church. This line of thinking has been summarized fairly well in *Central America since Independence*, edited by Leslie Bethell. It contains well-written essays by some of the most prominent historians of Central America, including Victor Bulmer-Thomas, Edelberto Torres Rivas, and Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr. Much of the collection focuses on the period after 1950, outside the time frame covered by this review essay.

According to this perspective, Costa Rica and Honduras were viewed as partial exceptions to the general pattern. In Costa Rica, the weakness of the colonial oligarchy and the lack of a large indigenous population were believed to have led to the predominance of small coffee farmers, who in turn constituted the social base for Costa Rica's more democratic and egalitarian traditions (Hall 1976). In Honduras, foreign banana companies supposedly exercised such strong control over the nascent national government that local elites were unable to use the state effectively to promote their own interests, and coffee production did not take off until after World War II (Pérez Brignoli 1981).

Over the last fifteen years, a new generation of historians has come forth, and they have begun to reexamine much of what had been accepted as established truth on Central America in this period. This younger group includes Victor Hugo Acuña, Marta Casaus Arzú, Marc Edelman, Dario Euraque, Jeffrey Gould, David McCreery, Héctor Pérez Brignoli, Mario Samper, Arturo Taracena, and Robert Williams. Its practitioners have employed original empirical research to derive analytical conclusions, thus breaking away from the previous tendency in Central American historiography either to be overly descriptive or to attempt to force complex and heterogeneous realities into simple preconceived models.[1] Rather then look for general conclusions applicable to all of Central America or to entire countries, these authors have focused more on explaining the differences among countries and among regions within each country. Like their predecessors, most members of this generation are committed to using their research to support social changes in favor of the poorer classes, but the younger historians take a more complex view of the multiple factors that affect these groups' political possibilities, access to resources, and standard of living. Inspiration has come more from Robert

1. As recently as 1987, Ralph Lee Woodward Jr. noted that Central American historiography was still largely concerned with establishing facts rather than drawing analytical conclusions, had undertaken little comparative work, and was often inferior in quality to work on other parts of Latin America.

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Brenner, Antonio Gramsci, Eric Hobsbawm, and Barrington Moore than from Marta Harnecker or the "world systems" or "dependency" theorists writing in the 1960s and 1970s.

Except for the Bethell collection, all the books reviewed here clearly reflect this new school of Central American historiography. *Las repúblicas agroexportadoras (1870–1945)*, edited by Víctor Hugo Acuña Ortega, is part of a six-volume project on Central American history. It includes excellent essays by Acuña Ortega, Mario Samper, Mario Posas, Arturo Taracena, and Victor Bulmer-Thomas on the coffee and banana industries, political history, the depression, and the role of the popular classes. Acuña Ortega and Iván Molina Jiménez's *Historia económica y social de Costa Rica (1750–1950)* consists of essays by Molina Jiménez written over a ten-year period on Costa Rican economic history (with an emphasis on coffee) and some of Acuña Ortega's earlier studies of the Costa Rican working class. *Tierra, café y sociedad*, edited by Héctor Pérez Brignoli and Mario Samper, offers an excellent collection of new empirical studies on an array of topics related to coffee in Central America. Marta Casaus Arzú's *Guatemala: Linaje y racismo* provides an original analysis of the evolution of the Guatemalan oligarchy from the seventeenth century through the twentieth.

The "Liberal Reforms"

A key point on which the new historical studies (such as the books edited by Acuña Ortega and by Pérez Brignoli and Samper) diverge from their predecessors is on the subject of the so-called liberal reforms. First of all, historians no longer assume that Liberals supported measures to build strong central governments, privatize land, and guarantee a labor force for agro-export production and that Conservatives uniformly opposed such policies. In Nicaragua, the Conservatives were the ones who first began to privatize land and promote coffee, while the Liberal Party was divided over certain "pro-coffee" policies, such as the imposition of forced labor. Similarly, many reforms traditionally associated with liberalism in Costa Rica were carried out by the Conservative governments of Braulio Carrillo and Juan Rafael Mora. Even in Guatemala, whose "liberal" reforms are often considered prototypical of the region, it now appears that the government of Justo Rufino Barrios adopted a much more contradictory and vacillating position toward privatizing land than has been previously acknowledged. Overall, one comes away with the sense that the ideological differences between the Liberals and Conservatives have been greatly exaggerated and that personal opportunism, family ties, short-term alliances with the United States or other Central American governments, and pure chance all had as much to do with who was a Liberal or a Conservative at any given time as did ideological or policy issues.

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The recent literature also shows that the privatization of land and destruction of indigenous communities often proceeded much more slowly than formerly believed and depended greatly on the relative strength of various forces at the local level. Merely issuing a decree promoting land privatization or "abolishing" indigenous communities in no way guaranteed that such things would actually happen. In fact, land privatization in Central America remains incomplete even today. Municipal, communal, and national lands continue to be important in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Government leaders, including Liberals, were not always interested in privatizing land completely. Some were afraid of provoking resistance by the indigenous communities, others wanted indigenous support for electoral purposes, and still others recognized the advantages offered by the communities as sources of taxes or cheap food and labor.

Essays by Jeffrey Gould and David McCreery in *Tierra, café y sociedad,* edited by Héctor Pérez Brignoli and Mario Samper, demonstrate that although the indigenous communities of northern Nicaragua and Guatemala lost part of their land as the result of coffee expansion, their loss was much smaller than is often implied and never threatened the communities' existence. This finding is not surprising, given that before World War II coffee never occupied a major portion of the land suitable for agriculture, nor did it account for a significant percentage of the land already being farmed (except in El Salvador). Moreover, because coffee requires different ecological conditions than food crops, the two uses of land rarely conflicted directly. It was precisely because the "liberal reforms" did not succeed in eliminating the rural masses' access to land that it was deemed necessary to impose systems of forced labor in Guatemala and Nicaragua to obtain labor for the large coffee farms.

It is also doubtful that indigenous communities were always hurt by land privatization or that they responded in similar ways to these efforts. McCreery shows that privatization in Guatemala actually made land tenure in many indigenous communities more secure, that some communities managed to title large areas in their names, and that privatization probably reduced, rather than increased, the frequency of conflicts over land. Some Indian families were harmed by land privatization, but others were helped, and their varying responses reflected these different interests. Some groups of indigenous people even succeeded in becoming small-scale coffee growers.

Unless one acknowledges the inability of the "liberal reforms" to destroy the indigenous communities in Guatemala (and to a lesser extent in Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica), it is hard to account for the great resilience of indigenous peoples' struggles in these countries to defend their lands and local institutions. This fact also implies that ethnicity remains a central issue in Central American society, despite its relative neglect in early works on the history of the region.

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Given that according to the new "revisionist" histories of Central America, only a small fraction of indigenous land was expropriated to promote coffee expansion and land privatization was gradual and produced contradictory effects, how can one explain the numerous indigenous rebellions mentioned in these same recent histories?[2] Based on the material in the books edited by Acuña Ortega and by Pérez Brignoli and Samper, four aspects seem to be central to attempts to answer this question. First, many conflicts between mestizos, ladinos, and Indians for access to land, control over labor, and other issues had little to do with coffee. Second, these conflicts exhibited a strong ethnic and racial component, which was largely neglected in earlier analyses. Third, in Guatemala and Nicaragua at least, the principal conflict between ladinos and Indians concerned control over labor, not over land. Fourth, the rebellions themselves were a major deterrent to further expropriation of indigenous lands.

The National-Regional Interface

The emphasis of earlier historians on the growing strength of the central governments during the latter half of the nineteenth century and their focus on national governments and statistics often led them to neglect the great differences among regions within each country and the continuing importance of local elites and institutions. Moreover, the overriding concern with agro-exports often encouraged historians to extrapolate conclusions from coffee- and banana-growing regions to entire countries. Hence the history of Costa Rica's central valley became the history of Costa Rica, that of Honduras's banana-producing North Coast became the history of Honduras, and so on.

Recent Central American historical work has been more sensitive to regional issues and histories. For example, whereas earlier comparative work on coffee in Central America such as that by Cardoso (1975) focused on the differences among countries regarding patterns of land tenure, control of labor, and organization of trade, finance, and processing, the book by Acuña Ortega and Molina Jiménez and that edited by Pérez Brignoli and Samper devote more attention to variations among regions. As noted, earlier historians emphasized that Costa Rica's democratic tradition was rooted in the predominance of small coffee farmers and that the authoritarian history of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala could be traced to the strong presence of large-scale farmers who needed to impose dictatorial rule to ensure their labor supply and access to land.

2. Revisionist studies make reference to indigenous rebellions in Grenada (1845–1849) and Matagalpa (1881) in Nicaragua; in Atiquizaya (1884), Cojutepeque (1872, 1889), and Dolores Izalco (1875) in El Salvador; and in Momostenango (1875), Quiché (1877), and San Juan Ixcoy (1898) in Guatemala. Others undoubtedly broke out as well.

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Much recent work, however, points to the fact that certain regions existed in each country where small coffee farmers were more important and others where large farmers dominated.[3] These differences in agrarian structure among regions in each country can be explained largely by preexisting patterns of land tenure, the level of effective control exercised by the central governments, the relative availability of land, labor, and capital, and technological considerations such as the predominance of wet or dry methods of processing coffee.

Another major contribution of the recent emphasis on regional diversity has been to supply a needed sense of proportion to discussion of the role played by coffee and bananas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, although not fully reflected in the books chosen for this essay, many new histories of specific regions have been published over the last ten years that focus on areas where coffee and bananas were nonexistent or only marginally important.[4] These studies have helped historians abandon the false image of Central American countries during this period as "coffee societies" or "banana republics" due to the overwhelming predominance of those two crops in regional export earnings. In this regard, it is worth remembering Edelberto Torres Rivas's observation in Bethell's *Central America since Independence* that as late as the 1940s, less then half of Central American agricultural production was intended for export.

An innovative interpretation emerging from the growing attention to regional history can be found in a forthcoming monograph by Darío Euraque on the Honduran oligarchy and the Central American crisis, which focuses on the unique conditions that emerged on the North Coast in the early twentieth century and that region's role in subsequent national events.[5] Euraque portrays modern Honduran history as being molded by persisting conflicts between the more dynamic and socially conscious political, social, and economic forces that grew up around San Pedro Sula and the more conservative culture of Tegucigalpa and the interior. The progressive role of San Pedro Sula is presented as the logical outcome of the area's earlier urbanization, influential immigrant community, trade-union traditions, and intense commercial and artisanal activity stimulated by the banana industry. Its local business community some-

3. Some authors have also questioned the magnitude of the differences in average land concentration between Costa Rica and the other Central American countries. For example, Samper's essay in the collection he co-edited with Pérez Brignoli shows that the difference in the concentration of coffee-growing land between Costa Rica and El Salvador in the mid-1930s was relatively small.

4. Examples in this regard include the histories by CIERA of the northern Segovias region (1984) and the department of Río San Juan (1989); Gould's history of rural protest in Chinandega (1990) in Nicaragua; Edelman's work on Guanacaste, Costa Rica (1992); and Schwartz's history of Petén, Guatemala (1990).

5. *Region and State in Honduras, 1879–1972: Reinterpreting the "Banana Republic"* is to be published by the University of North Carolina Press.

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times collaborated with the multinational banana companies and sometimes competed but was independent and foresightful enough at times to support some social legislation, unions, and strikes. The relatively populist policies carried out by the Honduras military governments of the 1970s are largely explained by the willingness of portions of the San Pedro elite to support such measures.

Capitalists and Workers

For all practical purposes, the period under study also saw the development of the two fundamental classes of capitalism: the capitalists and the proletariat. Production for profit and salaried labor existed in the colonial period, but not until the nineteenth century did wage labor become a central feature of the economy and Central America become definitively integrated into the world capitalist system.

The region's modern capitalist classes arose out of a mixture of traditional oligarchic families dating back to the colonial period and newcomers who succeeded in entering the inner circles. After painstaking genealogical research on eight of the most important ruling families in Guatemala, Marta Casaus Arzú explains brilliantly in *Guatemala: Linaje y racismo* why some families managed to survive and flourish under the new conditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: they achieved strategic alliances with other dominant families by marrying their children into those families, hedged their bets by having various family members participate on both sides of any major political conflict, diversified themselves in various occupations and types of economic activities, and used their economic power to gain political influence and vice versa. Casaus Arzú also shows that elite families whose members were dispersed over several Central American countries played major roles in efforts to achieve regional integration.

Running through all the activities and thinking of traditional oligarchical families in Guatemala is an extraordinary strain of racism that was used to justify these groups' oppression of the indigenous majority. Yet when necessary, these families have proved willing to incorporate other ethnic groups with economic and political influence, such as the Basques and later the Germans. They even accepted into their ranks eventually a group of mestizo families, many from Quetzaltenango, who had become important during the administration of Justo Rufino Barrios.

This fundamental continuity among the elite families of Guatemala contrasts sharply with the situation in Honduras, which has practically no traditional oligarchy. As Euraque's forthcoming study shows, the major elite families in Honduras are rather recent in origin, having been established by Arab and Jewish immigrants who settled along the Honduran North Coast in the early twentieth century. Unlike the tradi-

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tional elites elsewhere in Central America, these families' major sources of wealth were commerce and later manufacturing, not landownership or agricultural production. Moreover, the fact that they were foreigners often made it harder for them to achieve the political prominence and power that otherwise might have accompanied their economic success.

In comparison with the rapid consolidation of the new (and reconstituted) capitalist elites, particularly after 1870, the emergence of a significant self-conscious proletariat took much longer. One reason was the low level of urbanization and industrialization. As recently as 1920, Central America had only five cities with more than fifty thousand inhabitants (the capitals of Guatemala City, San Salvador, Managua, and San José, and the Salvadoran commercial center of Santa Ana), none of which was larger than a hundred thousand. Except for a few textile, beer, and cement factories and sugar mills, manufacturing remained largely in the hands of artisans. Other factors were the dispersed and seasonal nature of most wage labor in the countryside (except on banana plantations) and rural workers' continuing ties with production of petty commodities.

Only in the final decade of the nineteenth century did an incipient "working-class culture" develop in the major towns, centered around the growing number of skilled tradesmen. This milieu is well documented and described in Victor Hugo Acuña's contributions to his edited collection, *Las repúblicas agroexportadoras (1870–1945)*, and the work he coauthored with Iván Molina Jiménez, *Historia económica y social de Costa Rica (1750–1950)*. Initially, these groups began to organize mutual societies, sports clubs, and educational activities, but by the 1910s, certain elements among them had become more radical and were forming unions and left-wing associations. Many of these initiatives were temporarily repressed by the dictatorial governments of the 1930s.

The second major focal point for worker organization and strikes consisted of the enclaves of workers found on the banana plantations and sugar mills and in the mines and ports. All the Central American countries experienced sporadic episodes of labor militancy among these sectors. In a few instances, like the banana workers in Costa Rica and Honduras, the unions and parties that grew up around the banana plantations eventually played major structural roles in those societies. Here again, racial and ethnic tensions proved significant in greatly weakening these movements and limiting their impact on the larger society.

Ultimately, however, it was neither artisans nor workers in the enclaves who led the two great popular struggles of the 1930s. Instead, it was the small farmers and semi-proletarianized agricultural workers of western El Salvador and the Segovias region in northern Nicaragua who rose up against the established authorities in the Salvadoran Communist uprising in 1932 and the guerrilla war led by Augusto César Sandino from 1926 to 1934. Acuña Ortega construes these events as the last indige-

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nous uprisings against the liberal reforms, a valid interpretation. Others have viewed them simply as spontaneous defensive actions when faced with the immediate negative effects of the Great Depression and U.S. military intervention. But these uprisings could also be interpreted as forward-looking movements led by visionaries who set the stage for the revolutionary upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s.

Conclusion

Looking back on history generally leads to projecting the issues of the present on the past. Thus it may be inevitable that current concerns have helped shape the recent historical research agenda in Central America by focusing on issues of ethnicity, decentralization, regional disparities, the viability of small-farm production, the nature and prospects of popular movements, and the role of traditional elite families (many of whom have recently returned to the political limelight). At the same time, many questions that preoccupied earlier historians have tended to disappear from the debates, such as whether "dependent capitalism" could lead to long-term economic modernization, how to characterize the mode of production of nineteenth-century Central America, and what social grouping would lead the (presumably inevitable) socialist revolution. What has not changed is fascination with analyzing nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Central American history in the hope of gaining helpful insights on current problems. The recent work of historians focusing on this period has challenged myths and promoted new ways of thinking. As a result, the history of Central America will never be the same.

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