

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

After the Deluge: Central American Historiography at Low Tide

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This essay reviews the following works:

Centroamérica: Filibusteros, estados, imperios y memorias. By Víctor Hugo Acuña. San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Costa Rica, 2014. Pp. xv + 151. \$5.99 paperback. ISBN: 9789968684408.

I Ask for Justice: Maya Women, Dictators, and Crime in Guatemala, 1898–1944. By David Carey Jr. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. Pp. xxv + 335. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780292748682.

A Camera in the Garden of Eden: The Self-Forging of a Banana Republic. By Kevin Coleman. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. Pp. 312. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477308554.

Empire by Invitation: William Walker and Manifest Destiny in Central America. By Michel Gobat. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. 367. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780674737495.

Solidarity under Siege: The Salvadoran Labor Movement, 1970–1990. By Jeffrey L. Gould. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xviii + 262. \$29.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108410199.

Banana Cowboys: The United Fruit Company and the Culture of Corporate Colonialism. By James W. Martin. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018. Pp. x + 252. \$58.10 hardcover. ISBN: 9780826359421.

Breve historia de Centroamérica, 5th ed. By Héctor Pérez Brignoli. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2018. Pp. 352. ISBN: 9788491811923.

El laberinto centroamericano: Los hilos de la historia. By Héctor Pérez Brignoli. San José, Costa Rica: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de América Central, 2017. Pp. x + 163. \$4.40 paperback. ISBN: 9789968919326.

Las luchas de los trabajadores hondureños organizados (1880–1993). By Mario Posas. Tegucigalpa: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, 2017. Pp. 523. ISBN: 9789992632987.

Historia de las desigualdades sociales en América Central: Una visión interdisciplinaria, siglos XVIII–XXI. Edited by Ronny Viales y David Díaz. San José, Costa Rica: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de América Central, 2016. Pp. xix + 634. \$8.79 paperback. ISBN: 9789968919241.

Central America's singularity as the most sharply defined multinational region within Latin America springs from its physical geography (as an isthmus posing a quick route between the oceans) and from its political history (as a separate kingdom of the Spanish monarchy that has never ceased to aspire to reunification). Both features account in part for its third attribute as the Latin American region, along with the Caribbean,

most subject to scrutiny and encroachment by the United States. Fourth, the five countries (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica) traditionally counted as Central American, with the perennial exception of Costa Rica, have ranked for two centuries among Latin America's poorest and most violent, least democratic, most ineptly governed, and—in the contemporary era—the most inclined to civil war. As its peoples responded to these hardships by fleeing north to Mexico and the United States at accelerating rates, Central America cemented its fifth hallmark, as Latin America's mightiest immigration dynamo.

It is no surprise, then, that scholars have long offered up studies treating the five republics, separately or together, as connate components of a single entity, a tendency hardened by the eruption of civil wars across the isthmus in the 1970s and 1980s. Kindled by popular uprisings whose leaders professed ambitions ranging from liberal reform to social revolution, the wars mobilized an impassioned brigade of academic investigators who framed their research as a quest for the regional and national origins of the crisis. Linking the late Cold War drama of social revolution and ideological polarization to Central America's long history of militarism and dictatorship, racial and class oppression, poverty and inequality, and US government meddling, they handed over a rich harvest of knowledge about the region that spanned the social sciences and the humanities. Since the late 1990s, however, academic interest in the isthmus has subsided to perhaps half its former level, despite the evident persistence of the tensions and contradictions that plagued it before the era of civil conflict.¹ By all accounts, Central America remains a region locked in crisis.

The ten books, mostly by historians, chosen for this review essay reach across the postcolonial past in search of many of the questions probed with such intensity in the 1980s and 1990s. Four (by Víctor Hugo Acuña, Kevin Coleman, Michel Gobat, and James W. Martin) focus on aspects of the perennial tension between “the nation” and what counts as suitably “national,” over and against the people or institutions of the United States, whose overbearing power, habitual insolence, and occasional benevolence have long qualified it in the minds of many scholars as the fountainhead of the region's hardships. Two works analyze labor union organization, Mario Posas for Honduras and Jeffrey L. Gould for El Salvador. Two others (David Carey's and the essays edited by Ronny Viales and David Díaz) highlight inequalities, mostly of class, ethnicity, and sex, that are entirely internal in origin. Two books by Héctor Pérez Brignoli, for several decades the leading scholar of the region's contemporary history, stand alone for the breadth of their scope, both geographical and thematic, and will therefore be treated first. With few exceptions, the authors fail to match the best of the harvest of the 1980s and 1990s. Most were snared by shortcomings well known to critical readers not only of Central American scholarship but that of Latin America more generally: a distressing lack of balance, particularly in weighing the role of the United States; devotion to an agenda-setting ideology or theory so overbearing that it winds up trivializing or deforming what it seeks to illuminate; indifference to methodological rigor and consistency; and a tendency, in setting out the aims of the work and in framing conclusions, to disguise deficiencies with high-sounding locutions of dubious pertinence.²

Happily, none of these defects mar the two books by Pérez Brignoli. First published in 1985 and now in its fifth edition, his compact survey of isthmian history, *Breve historia de Centroamérica*, reigns for now as the preeminent account from the conquest until today. It surpasses the third edition (1999) of Ralph Lee Woodward's densely political *Central America: A Nation Divided* in conciseness and in chronological reach but more formidably in the priority the author accords to economic and social change. Like Woodward, Pérez Brignoli aims largely at readers in search of an introduction to the sweep of isthmian history. Perhaps of most interest to the scholar is Pérez Brignoli's closing interpretation of a region whose contemporary history he has both lived (in Costa Rica) and chronicled prolifically for some five decades. In almost every respect, on his account, the first eighteen years of the twenty-first century have fallen far short of the expectations for democracy and prosperity that flowered in the wake of the civil wars of the 1980s. Except for the military's withdrawal from direct rule and the now-routine use of elections to choose political leaders, the history of the last two decades is the familiar, grim tale of political corruption, lawlessness, and violence on a colossal

¹ The estimate adopts journal article publication rates as an index of research interest. *The Handbook of Latin American Studies'* online database reports that published journal articles whose titles included at least one of the five country names or their derivatives (excluding Panama and Belize) averaged 110 per year from 1980 to 2000 but declined to 53 a year from 2001 to 2015 (author's compilation from data reported at <https://hlasopac.loc.gov/index.html>.)

² The foregoing assessment is of course limited to the broad assortment of books under review; for more narrowly thematic *LARR* essays on recent work about Central America see Erik Ching, “The Popular Church and Revolutionary Insurgency in El Salvador,” *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 4 (2018): 876–885; Charles D. Brockett, “Violence, Peacebuilding, and Democratic Struggles in Central America,” *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 3 (2017): 495–504; Charles R. Hale, “What Went Wrong? Rethinking the Sandinista Revolution, in Light of Its Second Coming,” *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 720–727.

scale, and the persistence of authoritarian tendencies. Only Panama and Costa Rica recorded notable rises in their gross national products; everywhere else, an extraordinary dependence on emigrant remittances from the United States overtook the national economies. A far more diverse (but volatile) export sector has replaced the old dependence on coffee and bananas. The four northern countries continue to report poverty rates in the range of 40 percent (El Salvador) to 75 percent (Honduras), thus preserving their historic distance, in the area of human development, from Costa Rica (at 19 percent), whose government budgets two to three times as much for social needs as the other four. At the same time, the four continue to register net population losses owing to emigration, against Costa Rica's consistent net migration gains.

In his reporting of the dramatic rise in murderous violence that continues to eviscerate El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, Pérez Brignoli pauses to argue that violence has permeated Central American history for so long and to such an extent that one can only call it "structural," in the sense of its entrenchment (outside of Costa Rica) in a history of exploitation that began with Spanish colonization and continued after independence with a dependent peasantry and politics famous for their "insufficiencies." Democratic reform seems perpetually stymied, while authoritarianism still infuses politics, society, and culture. In the absence of a "modern nation," notoriously incapable elites govern according to their own interests. Precisely contrary in every one of these respects, he points out, is Costa Rica's history. The crowning failure in the northern four was the promising but immensely destructive and disappointing revolutionary movements of the Cold War period. Violence, "recurrent and multidimensional," and forever falling disproportionately on the poor, turns out to be the one inescapable theme of isthmian history across the centuries, at least outside of Costa Rica. But grounds for optimism, it seems, must be found; the book's last sentence appeals, rather incongruously and unpersuasively, to Central America's "enormous cultural wealth" and its "vast biodiversity" as its main hopes for a better future (305–309).

In the "Presentación" of his *El laberinto centroamericano*, a collection of five essays published between 1998 and 2005, Pérez Brignoli moves swiftly into valedictory mode. Looking back on a lifetime of research, writing, and teaching on Central America and having now arrived "at the last round" (he was born in 1945), the author admits that the history of the isthmus, beyond the obvious commonplaces, "still strikes me as difficult and enigmatic." As a result, he is all the more surprised by the relative lack of interest, among the region's own universities, "in seriously studying" the history of Central America. Thus, he points out, the subtitle he chose for this book: "In order not to lose ourselves in the labyrinth we need the threads of history. And there are many threads." (x).

The essay "Transformaciones del espacio centroamericano," displays the author's signature passion for the Annales approach to the past, particularly in its linkage of geography ("the dialogue between two oceans") and demography ("societies, states, and nations"). The region's natural biodiversity has in some way contributed to the persistence of a similarly diverse range of peoples and cultures (33). Fragmentation and diversity therefore remain the central characteristics of the isthmus, making attempts to overcome them by means of regional political or economic accoutrements likely to fail in the long run. "La diversidad étnica y cultural de América Central a comienzos del siglo XXI" delivers an abundantly mapped and documented diachronic analysis (beginning with the Kingdom of Guatemala) not only of ethnic and cultural diversity across Central America but of the diversity of scholarly approaches to that diversity over the last half century or so. Thirteen tables of statistical data and eleven maps break down the shifting distribution, country by country, of the region's indigenous peoples (including *afrocaribeños* and Garífunas) up to about 2000, when their numbers stood at six to seven million. Pérez Brignoli concludes that, owing to the persistence of deeply rooted inequalities between the indigenous and the nonindigenous in literacy and poverty, the future of the six isthmian countries (Belize is not included) "will be without peace and the horizon without light" unless their peoples succeed in narrowing those inequalities and ending the discrimination that sustains them (60).

A survey of Central American economic history from 1810 to 2010 (at fifty-four pages the longest essay in the book) opens by acknowledging the laboratory-like character of economies that are "relatively simple," geared as they are for exports (81). Yet economic diversity and complexity nevertheless prevail to a degree equivalent to the rest of Latin America in the varied forms and impacts of the relationships that unfolded among the states, economies, and entrepreneurs of the region over two centuries. If coffee sustained decades of dictatorship and oppression in Guatemala, it laid the foundation for stable, egalitarian democracy in Costa Rica. What follows reveals the maestro at his best: sharply analytical, comparative, and comprehensive yet concise treatments of the rise of coffee and bananas; the impact of the export sector on money, banking, finance, urbanization, and internal migration; the rise of imports; and the formation of national economies. Adroitly linking the differential impacts of growth, industrialization, and regional economic integration to distinctive, long-standing state and social structures, Pérez Brignoli traces today's national disparities

(with particular attention to Costa Rica) to two widely acknowledged sources: the particular structuration of the coffee economies in the nineteenth century and the thoroughgoing political changes that swept the region after World War II. Two short, densely argued encores reveal the range of a social scientist consumed with a passion to understand the past. The first analyzes the historiography of Latin American independence, highlighting the “muy peculiar” features of the Kingdom of Guatemala’s separation from the Spanish monarchy. The second breaks down O. Henry’s 1904 novel *Cabbages and Kings*, the original source of the invective “banana republic.” Set in the fictional country of Anchuria (probably Honduras), the novel “astonishes us for the shrewdness and certainty of its vision” (161). Encomiums for a novelist’s capacity to see the future, “shrewdness” and “certainty” apply equally to Pérez Brignoli’s gift for unraveling the past.

Two of the works reviewed here analyze the myriad inequalities that burden the region. The most ambitious is a collection edited by Ronny Viales and David Díaz, *Historia de las desigualdades sociales en América Central: Una visión interdisciplinaria, siglos XVIII–XXI*. Sixteen of these thirty essays on the history of economic, political, and cultural disparities in Central America focus, somewhat incongruously, exclusively on Costa Rica—the one country famous for being far less burdened by inequality than any other in the region. Only three essays take a regional perspective. Four focus exclusively on El Salvador and three on Guatemala, with one each on Nicaragua, Honduras, and Panama. Only one essay, on Costa Rica and Nicaragua, is explicitly comparative. Eighteen concern the twentieth century, six the nineteenth century, five cover at least part of both centuries and one deals with the mid-1780s.

The editors organized the essays according to a threefold distinction among inequalities: socioeconomic (nine essays), sociopolitical (eleven), and sociocultural (ten). Taken together, they admirably document the inexhaustibility of their common theme. In the economic realm, contributions on public finance, forced labor, the rich, the exploitation of woodlands, state-sponsored public works, and rural development projects stand out. Topics in political inequality include the ideology of liberalism, women and the jurisprudence of property ownership, citizenship rights, the political manipulation of census data, the suspension of constitutional guarantees, the state-sponsored repression of indigenous peoples, the impact of the welfare state on class formation, state-sponsored immunization campaigns, and neoliberal social policy. Culture-related essays cover the press, immigration policy, feminism, housing for the poor, gender inequality and the labor market, rural poverty, university extension programs, representations of gender in fictional literature, public opinion, and social movements favoring sexual emancipation. Among the most stimulating essays is the attempt by Francisco Delgado Jiménez and Ronny J. Viales Hurtado to measure inequality diachronically by proposing the construction of “a historical index of inequality” for Costa Rica from 1864 to 1950, consisting of weighted measures of population, employment, gross production, land ownership, and government social spending. The authors’ application of the index reveals shifts in levels of inequality (so defined) that in turn yield a rough periodization of this sort of inequality over eight decades in Costa Rica, along with causal hypotheses that merit the attention of investigators.

Given inequality’s ineluctability, ubiquity, and diversity across every sphere of human life, it would be hard to conceive of an investigation that could not be said to be “about” inequality in some way. One would have welcomed, therefore, an essay or two evaluating the relevance of inequality as a conceptual category in social science and historical research, perhaps by offering some limiting philosophical, anthropological, or sociological framework that might serve to justify the attempt to understand particular kinds of inequalities according to their nature or scope. What seems to prevail is the loose and entirely unexamined assumption that inequalities and exclusions of any sort are inherently objectionable and for that reason alone merit attention. Over this collection, as a result, a cloud of utopianism casts its familiar shadow, acknowledged but oddly welcomed in a prologue asserting that the transformation of Central America into “a region of peace, freedom, democracy and development” is “our utopia” (xi). Surprisingly, the volume lacks an interpretive analysis of the thirty essays that might have identified historical commonalities and diversities, exceptional findings, or unconventional but promising approaches. As a result, and owing as well to the extraordinary breadth of research topics and the absence of any common understanding of the limits of inequality as a concept, it is difficult to extract a clear sense of general patterns of inequality, their significance, or their variation across the isthmus over the last two centuries.

Inequality is also the master theme of the monograph by David Carey Jr., *I Ask for Justice*, whose subtitle conveys the challenge of uniting four disparate themes: justice, Maya women, dictators, and crime. The study confines itself to a phase (1898–1944) of the long “liberal dictatorship” that ended with the resignation of President Jorge Ubico and the onset of a decade of proto-democratic experimentation. The author draws his numerical data exclusively from surviving judicial records for the department of Chimaltenango, whose 69,000 Indians (1921) accounted for 79 percent of its population. Diverse, vaporous restatements of the

book's aim in the introduction deposit a mood of uncertainty regarding the author's purpose that never quite dissipates. Carey first proposes to show how "indigenous and poor women recast the terms of accusation and incrimination into terms relevant to their own lives" and thus demonstrate "how indigenous women's varied responses to the state's and men's attempts to mold and control them shaped the contours of social, economic, and political life in Guatemala" (6). The fog thickens in proportion to ever-widening statements of ambition: nation building and state formation will be explained by "exploring how domination, defiance, and accommodation shaped Guatemala" (10); the book will "identify patterns of how Mayas and poor ladinos adjusted to dictatorial rule" and "how power, gender, ethnicity, class and morality were constructed and contested" (17–18).

The one detectable certainty is that practically everything must be sorted out according to the ethnicity, sex, and economic status of the principals. Despite the analytic prominence of these concepts, their precise meaning and relevance remain distressingly underexamined, notwithstanding frequent appeals to the authority of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. The premise seems to be that whites and men habitually exploit nonwhites and women, and when they fail, it's because of the cunning and capacity for resistance of their intended victims. The court system was invented by the state to impose its will on people by promising "justice," but with ambiguous results. On the one hand, the downtrodden revealed their acceptance of the legitimacy of the courts whenever they sought remedies on their own initiative or appealed unfavorable decisions in defense of their rights. And yet the state failed to integrate the indigenous into its "hegemonic project" (228–229). Examples: Plaintiffs used the courts to "inflict damage upon or exact retribution or restitution from their adversaries." They often did so with the cooperation of local authorities, including judges (228). Indian women were more likely to initiate litigation and appear in court than ladinas (230). "Women continued to reject the dictates of patriarchs—whether in the home or the presidential palace—that they deemed excessive or unjust" (232). Carey found that "it was not unusual for indigenous litigants ... to enjoy success, if not justice, against ladino plaintiffs who accuse them of crimes. In light of Guatemala's history of racism, the judicial system was often fairer than scholars might have expected" (48).

The book's arguments hinge on numerical evidence culled from what survived of the official records of Chimaltenango's trial court, the Juzgado de Primera Instancia, and two of the department's municipal courts, those of Patzicía and San Martín. The statistical validity of sampled data normally requires case selection by means of a random sampling technique reported by the investigator. However, Carey says only that he "collected" 166 cases from the departmental court record between 1900 and 1944, out of the total of nearly 10,000. The same question arises in his choice of the 661 cases that he reports he "collected" from the two municipal courts. Since Carey says nothing about the principle that governed his choices, it is impossible for the reader to evaluate the sample's representative character. In 1921, Chimaltenango accounted for 4 percent of Guatemala's population and 5 percent of its indigenous population. Did the department's exceptionally high proportion of indigenous inhabitants (who in any case were one of twenty-three Maya ethnolinguistic communities) affect judicial outcomes there in distinctive ways? In addition to the court records, Carey "conducted and collected more than 100 oral history interviews with Kaqchikel elders" (21). But since the book's analysis ends in 1944, the relevance of that testimony to the period from 1898 to 1944 would seem to be severely limited by the age of the informants, who in any case Carey acknowledges "were reticent regarding how crime shaped their past" (22).

Presentism, ideology, and anachronistic logic pop up here and there, and then all at once when the author earnestly asks how—in 1914!—Estrada Cabrera's government could plausibly "portray the state as powerful" and "omnipotent" when "it failed to ensure such basic rights as access to food and healthcare" (124). Justice is classically defined as the virtue of giving others their due. While the contours of Carey's understanding of justice are not hard to discern, what one misses after finishing this book is a summary sense of what justice may have meant in the minds of Guatemalans living in Chimaltenango and beyond.

In the labor movement, solidarity is the cardinal virtue. It seems to be a defining characteristic among historians in their study of the movement as well, and the two whose work is reviewed here are no exception. Mario Posas's *Las luchas de los trabajadores hondureños organizados (1880–1993)* is a frankly hagiographic treatment of the Honduran labor movement and the organization to which it owed, in the author's view, much of its success—the Communist Party of Honduras. Posas treads well-traveled ground, much of it trod by the author himself in a number of similarly titled books published since the late 1970s.³ In the absence

³ *Notas sobre las sociedades artesanales y los orígenes del movimiento obrero hondureño* ([Tegucigalpa?]: ESP Editorial, 1977); *Tendencias ideológicas actuales en el movimiento obrero hondureño: Notas preliminares de una investigación* (Tegucigalpa: [publisher not identified], 1979); *Lucha ideológica y organización sindical en Honduras* (1954–65) (Tegucigalpa: Editorial Guaymuras,

of any attempt by the author to identify what he considers to be this book's independent contribution to the historiography of the Honduran labor movement, it is difficult to evaluate its originality. Only eight of the bibliography's sixty-one works prepared by writers other than the author were published after 1979. On the other hand, an abundant (but, regrettably, unlisted in the bibliography) number of Communist Party, labor union, and general-circulation periodicals published in Honduras are cited in the footnotes, along with a scattering of documents supposedly drawn from archives but without the basic identifying information that a researcher would need in order to consult them. In the absence of any explanation for having concluded the book's analysis in 1993, the choice seems arbitrary.

The book opens with the familiar sequence of the flow of US mining and banana capital to Honduras in the late nineteenth century, the emergence of a class of wage workers in both sectors, and the rise of a union movement subject to constant division and redivision. Posas dedicates about three-quarters of the book to the period ending in 1954, the by now thoroughly mythologized year of victory, when a three-month strike by banana workers resulted in the legalization of unions. A basic guide to the lifespans, ideological orientations, and relative importance of the dozens of unions and confederations of unions whose acronyms fly across these pages would have been welcome. Among the perennial sources of labor movement division and redivision, the Communist Party (itself rent by internal dissension) stands out; yet the author disconcertingly concludes that throughout the history of the Honduran labor movement, "the Honduran communists contributed leaders and ideological orientation to the struggles of the workers," including "leaders of great audacity and courage, some of whom gave their life for the proletarian cause. It is an act of justice to recognize this singular contribution to the struggles of the Honduran workers" (515). The evidence that Posas invariably cites in favor of the party's supposed contribution to the emancipation of labor and Honduras's progress toward democracy appears to have been drawn exclusively from the party itself, in the form of internal documents, the memoirs of its leaders, and party publications.

The Communist Party's *bête noir* was of course the anti-communist current in the Honduran labor movement. Having risen to a position of strength during the 1954 strike with the endorsement and the financial support of the US government and the US labor establishment, it merits only the scorn of the author. An even-handed analysis of its popularity would have been welcome. The dubious claim that "the Honduran workers have made a transcendent contribution to the social and political democratization of the country" (10) is likewise asserted rather than argued. Beyond the vagueness of its interpretations and its pamphleteering character, and despite an extraordinary volume of detailed narration at certain junctures, the most disappointing feature of this book is the absence of any concluding interpretation of what remains in fact an important chapter of Honduran history, namely, "the struggles of the organized Honduran workers."

At the outset of *Solidarity under Siege*, Jeffrey L. Gould professes his faith in history writing as a tool of social change, quoting (in an epigraph) the late Emilia Viotti da Costa's appeal to historians "to reinvent new forms of solidarity, and to find new roads to a more open and truly democratic world, where all people . . . will come together to participate equally in the wealth of the world" (1). As his guide in the interpretation of the political conflict to come, Gould cites Soviet linguist Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov (1895–1936), a distant herald of post-structuralism. Voloshinov's central claim, that individual consciousness (and thus language) can only be understood according to its social and ideological conditioning, relativizes everything, including his own theory. By condemning real men and women and their very language to the imaginary bonds of materialistic historicism and the class struggle, Voloshinov leaves da Costa's universalist utopia without a leg to stand on. The vehicle at hand in this project of reinvention is the fate of the shrimp industry workers of Puerto El Triunfo, El Salvador, for whom the 1980s was one long defeat, as it surely was for most Salvadorans. Gould deploys a superabundance of printed and oral sources to document that defeat in extravagant detail across two investigative fronts. The first seeks to grasp the personal experiences of individual union leaders, with a view to capturing their motives and gauging the level and nature of their commitment. Here, what seems to fascinate Gould above all is the making of individual class consciousness, which in his narratives often seems analogous to a religious conversion experience. The second front analyzes the play of larger institutional and ideological interests in shaping the choices of his leaders.

1980); *Luchas del movimiento obrero hondureño* (San José: Editorial Universitaria Centromericana, 1981); *Breve historia de las organizaciones sindicales de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: Fundación Friedrich Ebert, 1986); *Las centrales de trabajadores en Honduras* ([Tegucigalpa?]: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1986); *El movimiento sindical hondureño durante la década del ochenta* (Tegucigalpa: Centro de Documentación de Honduras, 1989); *Honduras trabajadores, estado y política* (Madrid: Fundación Paz y Solidaridad, 1996); *Diagnóstico del movimiento sindical hondureño: situación actual y perspectivas* (Tegucigalpa: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1999).

Yet despite (or more likely, because of) what some will praise as the book's "granular" quality, neither of these broad lines of inquiry renders an interpretation of El Salvador's self-immolation that extends beyond the tactical decisions of a few union leaders and left-wing politicians. Faithful to da Costa's altar call, Gould highlights the moral lesson learned of "a road not taken." In the face of state-sponsored repression and neoliberal economic policies, the workers failed to "maintain the dignified life and relative power for temporary and permanent laborers that they had achieved" in the 1970s. Instead of keeping to the new road, they traveled the old one of internal discord and interunion rivalry, which "ultimately blocked the possibility of a cooperatively run shrimp industry in Puerto El Triunfo" (2–3). In particular, the shrimp workers failed to satisfactorily navigate two transitions evidently dictated by the moral calculus at hand: that from shop floor solidarity to "a willingness to sacrifice for all union members," and that from labor solidarity to support for "social-political revolution" (9).

The story begins in the late 1970s. Despite the unfortunate presence among them of conservative voices, the workers of Puerto El Triunfo for the most part benefited from and contributed to the dramatic surge in labor combativeness that marked the nation's workforce. It was a moment whose potential for building a unified labor movement, politically powerful enough to block the right, would eventually be spoiled by two trends: the splintering effects on the movement of rival political parties of the left and center, eager to recruit newly bestirred collectivities of workers; and the homicidal right's vastly disproportionate punishment of conduct by the militant left, which itself, as Gould points out, was at times deliberately and self-destructively provocative.

Gould's meticulous breakdown of the ten-week reformist government that seized power in a military coup on October 15, 1979, yields what he calls a "new interpretation" of this critical juncture on the path to the full-blown civil war that would soon follow. His argument: an opportunity for peacemaking created by the ruling civilian-military junta was derailed by the violence and aggressive rhetoric of what Gould calls "the revolutionary Left," that is, the three main militias and their corresponding civilian front groups or "popular organizations." Their leaders shunned the opportunity to respond in kind to the junta's six-week suspension (from early November to mid-December) of violent repression. Given the importance Gould attaches to this episode, an attempt to compare the response to the lull, across the broad spectrum of opposition groups, including a clearer presentation of the differences within the far left, would have been welcome. Yet in conceding that a genuine meeting of minds between the radical left and government moderates was in any case an "impossibility," he seems to validate the interpretation that he claims to be revising (109).

As the informal truce collapsed, 1980 ushered in a savage war of mutual retaliation between revolutionaries, on the one hand, and a newly militarized government now determined to crush reformers as well as revolutionaries. The result was catastrophic for the union movement. A key question that Gould poses is the extent to which labor union alliances with revolutionary groups drew workers into a suicidal confrontation with the state and its death squad collaborators. While Gould seems to attribute most of the anti-labor repression to its alliances with the left, he also argues that an unspecified level of "endogenous transformation of consciousness," distinct from the influence of the revolutionary parties, inspired the rank and file in its search for a "secure and dignified life" (6, 125). His strongest evidence for the latter seems to be the support he detected for workers' cooperatives, a strategy "anathema to classic Leninism" and to the Salvadoran revolutionary leadership, which violently opposed the land reform and worker co-op programs of the Christian Democratic Party. Analyzing the divisive impact of the competition between left and centrist unions in Puerto El Triunfo during the height of the civil war, Gould concludes: "Two unions shared fundamental goals of a dignified life for their members, yet they could not join forces to save their livelihood" (158). Subsequent chapters document the violence unleashed by overlapping political and labor union rivalries at the national level, which by 1989 left the country's union movement "scarred and debilitated" (198), and the calamitous denouement in Puerto El Triunfo, where a long strike and a related bank fraud buried the shrimp industry in 1991.

Gould's adherence to the limited perspective of a particular segment of organized labor, and his fierce loyalty to its interests, deny the reader a wider angle of vision that might have yielded a more complete understanding of El Salvador's nightmare decade, embracing yet extending beyond the direct experience of his workers. The premise of the book seems to be that somehow, a vital share of El Salvador's past and future was and remains in the hands of its union leaders. In an unmistakable echo of da Costa's activist credo, Gould prayerfully concludes that "a reader might recognize hope in the moments of liberation and solidarity shared by so many and strive to create new societal forms that mirror such values. ... Memories of solidarity contain their own radical potential: they evoke long-censored dreams and aspirations for a dignified life in a better world" (237).

Four works deal broadly with the character of relations between the peoples and institutions of Central America and those of the United States. In two (Coleman and Martin) the center of attention is the United Fruit Co. The others (Acuña and Gobat) focus exclusively on William Walker's filibustering expedition.

Kevin Coleman casts *A Camera in the Garden of Eden* as a "local history of subaltern photography" (10) in the Honduran town of El Progreso, whose proximity to the banana plantations of the US-owned United Fruit Company turned it into "an imperial contact zone" in the first half of the twentieth century (11). The aim is to reveal, by examining contemporary photographs, how "a diverse group of local actors interfaced with the rhetoric and policies of Honduran liberals and the imperial ideologies and practices of the US fruit companies" (11). The vacuity of "interfaced with" turns out to be a sign of trouble ahead for the reader.

To illustrate his method of interpreting "photography as a practice of self-forging," Coleman singles out two studio photos taken by a professional photographer of El Progreso. In the first, a female domestic worker poses on a balcony while gazing toward the interior of the studio. In the second, a bruised and bandaged Chinese man poses in the same photographer's studio. Coleman knows neither the names of the subjects nor the dates the photos were taken. He concludes, nevertheless, that both photos record "vulnerabilities." The woman, as a female in the 1930s, would have been ineligible to vote and thus subject to "patriarchal rule" and to the sexual desire of some men and the protection of others. The man, Coleman surmises, was another "noncitizen" who must have been unjustifiably assaulted because of his ethnicity. While the woman was a victim of sexist discrimination, the second was a victim of racism. In allowing themselves to be photographed, both subjects, having been abandoned by "state and corporate power ... overcame a social position of vulnerability" and thus presented themselves as being "worthy of respect" despite their presumed inferiority. Coleman further infers that the photographer took these pictures "for the purpose of improvement" of Honduran society (1, 4, 12–14).

Coleman found the photos in the personal archive of the daughter of Rafael Platero Paz, a professional photographer who worked in El Progreso from 1926 until his death in 1983 and whose pictures Coleman draws on throughout the book. His second major photographic archive was that of the United Fruit Company. While the first was "an archive of labor and much more" the second was "an archive of capital." A third source were family photos preserved by the El Progreso "bourgeoisie," whose power Coleman locates as somewhere between the subjects of Platero Paz and those of the United Fruit photographers. Finally, Coleman studied photos published in Honduran periodicals, which he considers to be a record of changes in "public culture" (20).

Leaning heavily on the reductive sociology of a démodé Marxism, Coleman readily pigeonholes people and institutions as agents exclusively of capital, labor, imperialism, anti-imperialism or the bourgeoisie. Rather paradoxically, he transfers that typology to a considerably more relaxed interpretative approach to the photographic image, whose "semantic cargo ... is there for the taking" (99). While the grossly economic anthropology of the first principle is not even argued, the second is extravagantly and often mystifyingly theorized with references to Agamben, Althusser, Badiou, Barthes, Chakrabarty, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Said, Sartre, and Spivak, among others. A photo of Platero Paz in the open cockpit of a fighter airplane, for instance, documents the photographer's participation "in the vertiginous flight of modernity" (103), and like all of his self-portraits, it was a symbol of his search for "the recognition that he desired from his Other" (110), that is, his "second persona," which was in fact "a particular brand of social and cultural modernity" (109). In a chapter called "In Visibility in an Exceptional Space," middle-class demonstrators protesting the dictatorship in 1944 were there to "produce new truths" as they "performed their disagreement with the regime" (157). Marx greets Freud when a semi-nude portrait of Platero Paz standing next to another seminude (but lighter-skinned) man in a jungle setting reveals the photographer's success in having "expelled the super-ego that agro-export capitalism had installed in him" (226). This photo supplies the "garden of Eden" trope in the book's title and thus becomes the subject of frequent references throughout the book, each time with a distinctive interpretative flourish. In a chapter mostly devoted to images of the 1954 strike of United Fruit workers, we learn that "the gay *Garden of Eden* perfectly allegorizes an unexpected past, alluding to a pre-fallen paradise when nature herself was divinity and humans were demiurgic artists" (237).

Coleman's passionate advocacy of photographic evidence vastly exceeds its capacity to explain anything. As a result, his hackneyed treatment of Honduran–United Fruit relations as a case of imperialist exploitation remains untouched by his photographic interpretations, which seem too laborious, speculative, capricious, and lexically challenged to add up to a clear line of argument that one might apply to the history of those relations.

The subject of James W. Martin's *Banana Cowboys* are the one thousand to two thousand mostly American (but all white) men employed as submanagers and technicians by the United Fruit Company on its banana and sugar plantations (and related enterprises) across a half million acres in seven Latin American countries from about 1900 to 1930. After 1930, they were increasingly replaced by local nationals. "Much" of the book, Martin writes in the introduction, will show how the company and the men in question "fostered a sense of personal connection with challenging tropical surroundings and thereby sought to reconcile white bodies and minds to tropical life." But the book will also tell how the company tried to "channel" its American employees' lives there. Then again, the "focus" will be "on how those individuals experienced these 'close encounters of empire' and enacted scientific and cultural imperatives over their surroundings." Finally, the American employees "existed in between the corporation and its domination of tropical peoples and places," and so the book aims to "capture that in-betweenness" (3).

The alert reader will already have recognized Martin's glancing reference to a foundational text in the study of the US presence in Latin America as a problem of cultural interaction rather than as a merely military, political, or economic relationship. Twenty years ago, the publication of *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, a collection edited by Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore (Duke University Press, 1998), sought to synthesize and give direction to nascent attempts to link culture and power in the history of US relations with Latin America, a topic neglected (according to the editors) by that motley band of one-eyed positivists (modernizationists, Marxists, and *dependentistas*) who until then controlled the interpretation of those relations. *Banana Cowboys* epitomizes the power/culture genre's congenital deficiencies. The first is its maddening vagueness and inscrutability, particularly (and fatally) in passages intended precisely as interpretations of arduously documented quotidian realities. The second is its moralistic reductionism, which requires that absolutely everything be dumped into the grinder of imperialist exploitation and colonialist victimization. Martin's version conscripts a particular assortment of concepts (e.g., "corporate colonialism," "corporate empire," "corporate welfarism") that evidently require neither theorization nor even definition and yet are made to bear all the interpretive weight of his research, which he sees as a contribution to the "cultural history of empire" (17). The implied but never actually argued conclusion is inescapable: Latin America today would be a much happier place had it not been for the United Fruit Company.

Among the products of "corporate colonialism" that Martin analyzes were the UFCO company towns. Like their many contemporary, US-based analogues, the towns aimed at ensuring the health, welfare, and loyalty of the employees (both US and local) who lived in them, while seeking to impress the locals with US racial and technological superiority. Yet Martin offers no evidence of any actual external impact on the people of the country. As a result, his skillful account of the towns (drawn entirely from English-language sources) stands in the same splendid isolation from the relevant national environments as did (allegedly) the company towns themselves. The chapter's concluding interpretation—that the towns were "points of intense, unequal engagement between white American employees and nonwhite laborers" (96)—is more asserted than shown, especially in view of the absence of nonwhite or non-US voices. Similarly, the author reduces UFCO's massive investment in the treatments of malaria, venereal disease, and hookworm to "medical colonialism" (13), which in turn yields the predictable Foucauldian interpretation of the company's medical department as "a disciplinary institution bound to shaping the physical environment and insinuating its authority in the lives and bodies of laborers" (101). UFCO's anti-malaria campaign can therefore be explained exclusively by the medical department's desire to expand its power (103, 104). A fascinating chapter on the extraordinary scope of contributions by UFCO and its employees to knowledge of Central America's pre-Columbian history and of its natural environment adds up to nothing more than an instance of "'imperial science,' inquiry that more often than not buttressed the corporation's interest and naturalized US power in the region" (185).

For a study of US imperialism, the book's most glaring omission is the absence of any attempt to weigh the reception, by its colonial victims, of UFCO's acts of corporate (cultural) imperialism. The omission highlights a pair of methodological defects: the mere assertion, without argument or evidence, of an imperial-colonial relation at play between UFCO and Latin America; and the deployment of the zero-sum fallacy, which forces the author to assume that, if a particular US company policy benefited its managers, stockholders, or employees, it must have harmed Latin Americans.

Thanks to the momentous but independent efforts of Victor Hugo Acuña and Michel Gobat, realized in the two outstanding volumes reviewed here, the historiography of William Walker's intervention in Nicaragua in the 1850s can fairly be said to have been reborn. These two complementary works deserve to be read together precisely for their radical differences in approach and style: Acuña's richly speculative, comparative,

and philosophical above-the-fray tone versus Gobat's lavishly documented investigative analysis, crafted as traditional narrative keenly sensitive to the personal and the dramatic aspects of his story.

Acuña prefaced his collection of five essays (originally published between 2009 and 2012) with a magisterial analysis of two sizeable historiographical problems that transcend Walker but that no one studying him and his movement can avoid. The first, the subject of intense debate and much useful theorizing in the last four decades, is the tension between the strictly national or "internal" on the one hand, and that which it inevitably encounters: the "foreign," the extra-national or "external." Reviewing the conscientious historian's primary options ("global" vs. "relational," *inter alia*), Acuña situates his own preference within a third: that of *histoire croisée*.⁴ In this mode, the historian seeks not merely to identify connections, but "processes of production of historical phenomena that are solely intelligible as the result of the intertwinements that transcend national spaces" (7). Thus, what Acuña considers to be the principle methodological novelty of his five Walker essays: namely, their success in breaking away from the ideologically nationalistic orbit that has governed the Walker saga for more than a century and a half. Of particular interest to the author is the way that the states of the region attempted to turn the Walker story into a tale designed to inspire patriotism, and here Acuña treats the reader to an edifying analysis of memory as a historiographical problem. Of the relationship between memory (personal, socialized, and thus often confused) and history ("erudite, technical and specialized") (14), he proposes an attitude of mutual respect and discovery—essential, he argues, for the exercise of citizenship in a democratic regime.

In another essay, Acuña presents a strong argument for interpreting the Walker affair as the presumptive outcome of a manifestly immature stage of state formation, not only in Central America but in the United States in the 1850s. Framing the episode as a three-way struggle among states and empires as well as filibuster gangs, he points out that the weakness and instability of the Latin American states enhanced the allure of filibustering, making them "easy prey" (45). It was likewise enhanced by the incapacity of the young US state to prevent filibustering, a deficiency that it would only overcome as a result of its own Civil War. This antebellum internal insufficiency was offset by the country's expansionist tendency, which Acuña associates with empire building. Another empire, that of Britain, having delivered Walker bodily to the Honduran government and thus to his executioner, soon ceded its Caribbean hegemony to the increasingly powerful, postbellum US state. Apart from the doubtful claim that the collapse of *filibusterismo* contributed to the Southern states' decision to secede from the Union, Acuña deftly applies the logic of *histoire croisée*, revealing the interwoven connections—causal as well as consequential—among the collectivities in play in the 1850s.

Of the remaining essays, perhaps the most notable is an ambitious attempt to analyze and compare a vast range of published work (from memoirs and documentary collections to government-sponsored accounts and "professional" histories) about the Walker affair by nationals of the United States, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica from the 1850s until today. Acuña's analysis yields three different, "national" interpretations. The US literature, in his view, is distinguished both by its unmerited scarcity (which he interprets as a desire to forget the whole thing) and simultaneously by its failure to attend adequately to the event's Central American protagonists, an oversight that he attributes to the racist and imperialistic premises of the US authors. The sole exceptions are "the youngest authors" (100) of whom he names three, who correctly identify the United States as an imperialist power. Costa Ricans, interpreting the affair as a great national triumph, have shown more interest in self-aggrandizement than historical balance. Nicaraguans politicized the Walker affair by presenting themselves as victims, both of Walker's atrocities and of Costa Rican duplicity, while struggling with the inconvenient fact that they invited Walker to Nicaragua in the first place. For Nicaragua, the war became "an uncomfortable memory" in contrast to the Costa Ricans' construction of a "memory of self-satisfaction" (101).

Michel Gobat's stunning reinterpretation of Walker's expedition to Nicaragua and his fourteen-month government of the country reverses or heavily qualifies almost every thesis that the conventional historiography has been teaching about Walker for more than a century. On Gobat's account, Walker and his international army of 59 freedom-loving soldiers, followed by some 12,000 would-be US settlers (mainly Northerners, not Southerners), came not to subjugate Nicaraguans, much less to restore slavery, but to liberate them from tyranny and poverty and deliver democracy, equality, and liberal capitalist development. That they were invited to Nicaragua by the Nicaraguan Liberal Party to help defeat its Conservative Party

⁴ One of a number of relational approaches to the past that, as the term implies, highlights intersections among disparate national formations. Acuña cites as his authority a key reference in the literature, Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50.

rivals in a civil war is a well-established but frequently omitted detail; however, that the invitation included a postwar commitment by Walker to “Americanize” Nicaragua radically revises the standing interpretation, as does Gobat’s argument that most Nicaraguans, irrespective of class or status, welcomed Walker and his followers as political liberators and contrivers of prosperity. Liberals and Conservatives alike, as well as important Catholic clerics, collaborated with Walker in governing Nicaragua, in the cities and across the countryside, among the downtrodden and the elite. In Guatemala and El Salvador, liberal politicians endorsed his government. Perhaps the crowning revision is the claim that Walker’s downfall owed less to a popular explosion of righteous nationalism across the isthmus than to his attempt to revolutionize Nicaragua in favor of the poor and the politically excluded, a move that alienated his supporters among the upper classes.

Essential to grasping both the Nicaraguan and the US mentalities of the 1850s is an understanding of the rise in both countries of a popular belief in, and support for, a US “manifest destiny” linked to Thomas Jefferson’s aspiration for an “empire of liberty,” particularly in the wake of the US-Mexican war and the California gold rush. But no factor rises higher than one cold fact of Nicaragua’s geography: it alone in the entire hemisphere provided the conditions for the cheapest means of maritime transportation between the two oceans. The discovery of California gold in 1848 would, therefore, draw all eyes to Nicaragua, along with a flood of immigrant-colonists, transcontinental voyagers, investors, traders, entrepreneurs, and fortune hunters. For most Nicaraguans, the gold rush was an unsought but not to be squandered opportunity for political as well as economic development, which for the very same reasons made the country prime mission territory for Americans on the make.

In the midst of their losing war against the Conservative Party, Nicaragua’s Liberal Party pacted with Walker in 1855 to supply a US mercenary army in exchange for land and Nicaraguan citizenship for Walker’s soldiers and the thousands of settlers expected to follow him. Like Walker himself, the Liberals and some Conservatives also expected the filibusters to aid in “civilizing” Nicaragua. Having provided decisive military leadership in the defeat of the Conservative government in October 1855, Walker handed the political administration of the country over to the Liberals but controlled it behind the scenes with his near-monopoly on military power. Eight months later, he seized power directly through a fraudulent presidential election. Gobat emphasizes the broad public support accorded Walker, at least initially, owing to his comparatively stable and well-administered government, his judicious use of power, his skill in manipulating the country’s traditional caudillo networks, and his army’s defeat of an early invasion of Costa Ricans.

US president Franklin Pierce’s decision to recognize the Walker government in 1856 directly inspired thousands of US residents to move to Nicaragua as permanent settlers. Gobat meticulously analyzes their diverse motives and interests and devotes an entire chapter to the vexed question of the sort of regime that Walker (and his ideologically disparate followers, Nicaraguan and non-Nicaraguan) envisioned for Nicaragua. Amid the hodgepodge of plausibly documented alternatives, Gobat settles on the nineteenth-century notion of an independent and democratic “liberal empire,” politically separate from the United States yet dependent on its core governing values and looking to unite (and civilize) all of Central America from the imagined imperial capital of Granada. Gobat downplays, as an uncharacteristic act of desperation, Walker’s never-implemented decree of 1856 legalizing slavery, while observing nevertheless that the decree fatally undermined domestic and foreign support for the regime at the very moment that Walker sought to fend off a combined invasion by Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. Even more crippling to Walker’s standing was his decision, in retreat, to burn Granada to the ground. As his regime crumbled, Walker turned increasingly cruel and autocratic, sealing the legacy of contempt for him and his followers that has never faded in Central America.

To Gobat, the affair deserves scrutiny as a precursor of US expansionism and as evidence against the obviously bogus doctrine of US exceptionalism. Paradoxically, however, the author has also given us, in what may well stand for years as the most thorough, thoughtful, and balanced rendering of the Walker affair on offer, good reasons to appreciate the extent to which the beliefs that inspired Walker and a great many of his followers (Nicaraguan as well as non-Nicaraguan) actually did epitomize the exceptional character of the United States. That the experiment ended so tragically for its supposed beneficiaries isn’t proof, as Gobat supposes, against the doctrine of exceptionalism, which may well be true, but rather against the suppositions that liberty can be compelled, or that the idea of liberty cannot readily be distorted for perverse ends, or that a leader’s virtue is of small moment.

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