

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN CRISIS*

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For the last ten years, Central America has been in upheaval, experiencing fundamental social and political change, with the Nicaraguan revolution representing the most dramatic rupture with the past. This revolution, the civil war in El Salvador, two recent coups in Guatemala, and the militarization of Honduras by the United States are all aspects of the crisis currently transforming the region. This article will argue that these dramatic events comprise a general disintegration of what might be called the "old order" in Central America. While the particular characteristics of each country must be taken into account, a process of creative destruction can be identified that is best understood at the level of the region as a whole.

Recently, writers with diverse points of view have offered complementary, if not entirely similar, analyses of the Central American crisis. Enrique Baloyra uses the term "reactionary despotism" to characterize the regimes of the region and comments that what is surprising about Central America today is not that the old order is collapsing, but that it managed to endure so long (1983, 314–15). From another perspective, Mario Solórzano Martínez uses the term *democracias de fachada* to capture the reactionary nature of the political systems of the region (1983). In the same vein, Ralph Woodward refers to the "inevitable collapse" of the power of the "old elites" in Central America (1984, 291). Common to these interpretations is the view that the social and political systems of Central America have been historical anachronisms and that the analytical task, prior to explaining their collapse, is to account for their persistence.

This article will first employ synthetic analysis to draw together the literature characterizing the Central American social formation. It

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will then explain the uniquely reactionary nature of the region in terms of its land tenure systems. Baloyra's term "reactionary despotism" is used, here defined as a regime based on landed interests that opposes political and social modernization. These landed interests are labeled *landed property* to distinguish them from the interests based on industrial capital.

While this article will not directly address questions of policy, its thesis has major implications for the current efforts of the U.S. government to manage events in Central America. In recent years, a flood of studies, books, and polemical reports (such as that of the Presidential Bipartisan Commission on Central America) have argued for a range of policy alternatives from military intervention to rapid disengagement. Many of these works assert that something like normalcy can return to Central America, with evolutionary social reform managed through elections within existing institutions.

The analysis here will challenge such a view by arguing that major structural transformations are imminent in the region. Some of these, such as the overthrow of Somoza in Nicaragua, have already occurred, but others are difficult to anticipate. The "old order" in Central America was based (and in three of the countries in the region, remains based) on a reactionary despotism that by its tenacity defies peaceful reform. The structural conditions for reactionary despotic rule began to weaken in the 1970s, however, and a general breakdown is imminent. Out of this general breakdown of the Central American social formation will arise the conditions for the modernization of political life that have been so long delayed.

REACTIONARY DESPOTISM IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The Basis for U.S. Hegemony

Twentieth-century Central American history has turned on two axes: the power of landed property and domination by the U.S. government. While the power of landed property originated in the colonial period, not until the second half of the nineteenth century did it assume a particularly reactionary and hegemonic position in the region. The second factor, the role of the United States, was relatively latent in the nineteenth century, asserting itself fully only eighty years ago. These two elements are not unique to Central America, yet nowhere else in the hemisphere has either been such a determinant of events. U.S. troops have never intervened south of the Canal Zone. Nor has a U.S. government ever funded an insurrectionist army in South America like those it supported to overthrow the government of Guatemala in

1954, to attempt to invade Cuba in 1961, and to effect counterrevolution in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

The form taken by these two elements in the region is related to the manner in which *country status* emerged in Central America.¹ During the colonial period, Central America was administered via the *Capitanía de Guatemala* as a subdivision of New Spain. The authority emanating from Guatemala City was weak at best, and political control in the region decentralized around the provincial towns. The weakness of central authority in part reflected the wretched state of communications in the isthmus, but the lack of roads and administrative infrastructure themselves resulted from Central America's limited economic importance to the Spanish crown. During the colonial period, Central America generated few exports compared to other Spanish possessions in the New World.²

Limited commercialization reinforced the parochial rivalries of the Central American classes of landlords and merchants, rendering their economic interests competitive rather than complementary. The conflict among the provincial oligarchies centered on disputes with the elite in and around Guatemala City, which enjoyed the privileges associated with colonial administration. In South America, too, conflicts occurred between the colonial capital and provincial centers, as when the merchants of Buenos Aires demanded an end to Lima's monopoly of foreign trade. But in South America, these conflicts for the most part reflected the increasing economic development of the provinces relative to Lima. With the production of export commodities growing and the world market expanding during the eighteenth century, provincial elites sought to break free of royal restrictions on their trade and profits. In Central America, where indigo was the only significant export, the control of foreign trade mattered primarily as a source of revenue, and provincial elites fought over a limited and stagnant regional economy at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Economic conflicts among regions in South America prompted the eventual breakup of the colonial order and brought about a coalescence of the dominant classes around regional centers. This process of fragmentation followed by coalescence resulted in the emergence of the modern states of South America and was well underway by the time of independence.

In Central America, however, the end of colonial rule reinforced the tendency toward fragmentation without generating a process of coalescence. One province, Chiapas, split off permanently, not for independence but to join the Mexican union. In 1823 a Central American federation was formed, legally uniting five states, but the five states existed largely in name only. These geographical entities had little cohesion or identity that coincided with the territories their governments

claimed to control. Off to an unsteady start that included a debilitating civil war (1826–1829), the federation disintegrated after fifteen years.³

The collapse of the federation did not lead to the rapid formation of five cohesive countries. Of the group, Guatemala had the most coherence and identity. Two Guatemalan strongmen, Rafael Carrera and Justo Rufino Barrios, dominated the region from 1838 until 1885 (their regimes separated by only eight years). These two dictators maintained subservient governments in El Salvador and Honduras, so that the “Northern Triangle” of Central America lay under the shadow of Guatemala City for half a century. Costa Rica escaped this fate, being too far away and too sparsely populated to be tempting. During the same period, Nicaragua was split politically by the rivalry between the elites of León and Granada, and it had no national government as such until the presidency of José Santos Zelaya (1893–1909), who used the internal cohesion he had forged as a basis for dominating the region.⁴

Central America in the nineteenth century remained in the early stage of country formation. The political future of the region—whether it would be forcibly united by a local warlord or dissolve into several countries—remained unresolved. It is therefore both inaccurate and arbitrary to analyze economic and social change during this period on the basis of five separate states. The many interventions by the regional governments in each other’s affairs demonstrate this generalization clearly. The weakness of political organization and institutions of state control in the nineteenth century also left Central America particularly vulnerable to outside intervention. Its vulnerability resulted from the governments’ weakness in resisting intervention; and that same weakness made each government an unreliable ally for any interested great power. During the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the two major powers with designs on the region—Great Britain and the United States—were largely content to exercise their influence through local rulers and leave the political instability of the region to resolve itself as it might.

But the nationalism (or perhaps more accurately, regionalism) of the last of the strongmen, Zelaya of Nicaragua, proved unacceptable to the government of the United States. Although the immediate cause involved a proposed treaty for a canal through Nicaragua, Washington had viewed Zelaya with growing impatience throughout his presidency. When the Nicaraguan dictator refused to surrender sovereignty over the proposed canal zone, the U.S. government intervened militarily to aid his opponents, thus effecting his overthrow. With Zelaya replaced by a U.S. client, a power vacuum resulted in Central America, one that was quickly filled by the United States.

The most common explanation for the colonial role played by the United States after Zelaya’s fall in 1909 holds that it was prompted by

strategic interests related to control and protection of the Panama Canal. While this view is true, it is also true that U.S. hegemony in Central America was made possible because the local dominant classes had not achieved effective, institutionalized control over their territories and populations in the five states. Defenders of U.S. intervention have justified what Woodward calls the "New American Empire" on the grounds that the "political instability" of the region induced it.⁵ This apologetic position contains some truth, for had the rule of the local elites been more cohesive and their power more institutionalized, intervention would have been less necessary to maintain U.S. economic and political interests.

After the fall of Zelaya, Central America was not merely part of the U.S. sphere of influence. This would also be an accurate assessment of U.S.–South American relations, but the relationship with Central America went further, to semicolonial status. The consequence of this particular status for the evolution of the Central American ruling elites has been profound. To a qualitatively greater extent than in South America, these elites became dependent upon Washington. After 1909 their internal conflicts, within each state and among the states, were mediated and directly resolved by U.S. diplomatic (and undiplomatic) intervention. Nicaragua constituted the extreme case, being occupied militarily by U.S. troops for twenty years, then ruled for another forty-five by a family whose power had been created by the U.S. government. But in all five countries, at least one government was directly removed or installed by U.S. pressure between 1909 and 1945, and virtually all governments needed U.S. consent to rule (LaFeber 1983).

The powerful, direct role of the U.S. government in mediating intra-elite disputes and often imposing solutions (which continues to this day) imparted a particularly reactionary and antipopular character to the regimes in Central America, with the obvious exception of Costa Rica. Because Washington demonstrated a willingness to use force to keep certain groups in power (having put them there in the first place in some cases), the ruling elites felt little pressure to accommodate the demands of the middle and lower classes for reform or even nominal political participation. The absence of pressure to accommodate such demands complemented the system of land tenure and labor coercion that emerged during the nineteenth century, itself predicated upon authoritarianism.

Land Tenure and Labor Control

In the colonial period, the vast majority of the Central American population lived in the areas that are now Guatemala and El Salvador. Agricultural production was based upon social relations that tied the

peasantry to the land and granted landlords the right to a portion of the product or working time of peasants.⁶ Initially, wealth was appropriated through the *encomienda*, similar to practices elsewhere in Latin America (McLeod 1973). Villages and their surroundings were allocated to the Spanish conquerors and their descendents, who extracted tribute. Early in the colonial period, the authorities forced the indigenous population into villages to facilitate collecting tribute (Whetten 1961, 117). Abuses of the system led to its eventual abolishment by the Spanish crown, and it was replaced by other forms of forced labor. The most important of these was the system of *mandamiento*, in which colonial magistrates assigned to villages a quota of workers for specific purposes and duration (Whetten 1961, 118; Martínez Peláez 1979, chaps. 3 and 4).

By the end of the colonial period, power over the use of land was so concentrated that contemporary observers identified it as the major social and economic problem in Central America. In 1811 an organization of merchants in Guatemala City issued a document decrying the power of the landed elite and recommending agrarian reform that would return the land to the tiller.⁷ But the most important aspect of the land question in Central America has not been the concentration of ownership. Indeed, it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that land held in common by peasants was largely eliminated, except in Honduras (Durham 1979). Rather, the power of landlords lay in the social relations governing the tenancy of land. Although the colonial coercive labor systems formally disappeared after independence, other more coercive and repressive systems replaced them and have continued to the present.⁸

During the early years of the Central American federation, Liberals controlled the central government. Their ideology derived from the Cádiz Constitution of 1812 stressing anticlericism and economic modernization (Rodríguez 1978; Woodward 1984). Opposing this program were the Conservatives, who sought to maintain a traditional society based on the church and feudal landholding patterns. Both parties represented factions of the landholding elite, but they sought different forms by which the peasantry would be controlled and land exploited (Woodward 1984; Browning 1971, 154ff). Central to the Liberal modernization program was the alienability of land and the abolition of servile labor systems. The Liberal-controlled federal government sought to implement these reforms but quickly met strong opposition from both the Conservative faction of the landlord class and the peasantry. The alienability of land (which was to be pursued with greater vigor and success fifty years later) threatened the peasantry with landlessness, while eliminating coercive labor systems threatened the power base of the Conservative landed elite.

As a result of the strong opposition to the Liberal reform pro-

gram, land tenure changed in an incomplete manner that did little to modernize social relations. The powerful combination of the Conservative opposition and a peasant uprising led to the collapse of the federation and the rule of Conservative dictators in Central America for forty years. Liberal reforms did facilitate the buying and selling of land, but without significantly altering the servile labor systems. The superficial and incomplete character of the Liberal reforms laid the basis for the subsequent rigidification of the coercive labor systems in response to the development of coffee production. In the 1840s, coffee production spread rapidly through Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador, bringing the landholding class into international trade. Until banana production developed at the end of the century, coffee was the region's only major export, marking the period from 1850 to 1890 as the era of the "coffee republics" in Central America. In the three countries where coffee boomed, this export crop determined not only the health of their national economies but also the political character of the state.

Producing coffee is an extremely labor-using activity. In El Salvador and Guatemala, coffee production was concentrated on large estates from the outset, and the landed oligarchy required a large supply of labor, particularly for picking. It is not too much to say that ensuring an adequate supply of field labor has been the obsession of the coffee oligarchy in Central America for over one hundred years, an obsession unconstrained by consideration for the individual freedoms of the rural population. Writing on El Salvador, Browning observed that the coffee oligarchy showed "a determination to introduce any changes considered necessary to ensure that the maximum amount of coffee would be produced in the shortest possible time" (Browning 1971, 172). Once large-scale coffee production began in Central America, the primary function of governments became facilitating the planting, harvesting, and exporting of coffee.

Particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala, governments served as the direct agents of landed property, and state repression played a central part in the day-to-day operation of the large estates. The role of the state in facilitating coffee production expanded dramatically with the return to power of the Liberals in the 1870s. Formally proclaiming a classic liberal philosophy of *laissez faire*, these governments in Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as in Nicaragua (under Zelaya), intervened aggressively on behalf of the coffee elite. Two of the most important forms of intervention were dispossessing the peasantry, which virtually eliminated common lands, and codifying forced labor for the coffee estates (Browning 1971, 205–7; McCreery 1983, 38ff).

Once the profitability of coffee production made itself evident, landed interests used the state to force the peasantry off land suitable for this cash crop and onto marginal lands of low productivity. The

expulsion of the peasantry in Guatemala resulted in the depopulation of areas occupied for centuries, profoundly transforming the countryside (Solórzano F. 1963, 430). Marginalizing the peasantry onto small and unproductive plots tended in itself to generate the labor supply required for the large coffee estates. Reduced to tiny holdings, a large proportion of the peasantry could no longer sustain self-sufficiency. By the 1890s, basic foodstuffs had to be imported into Guatemala and El Salvador (Mosk 1958, 176–77; Durham 1979, chap. 2).

With its political and economic power virtually unchallenged, the landed class in Guatemala and El Salvador was not content to let the pressure of poverty and deprivation generate an adequate supply of field labor. To ensure a permanently available work force at the lowest possible cost, landowners employed the state to adapt the traditional servile labor systems to the new orientation to the world market (Solórzano F. 1963, 378; McCreery 1983, 40). In 1878 the Guatemalan government promulgated the *Reglamento de Jornaleros*, which codified a system of labor contracts and debt peonage as the legally enforceable form of agricultural labor, and this law of forced labor continued with modifications until 1934 (Whetten 1961, 119; Jones 1940).

Although forced labor had long occurred in Central America, its earlier forms were relatively benign when compared with its later use in the coffee era. Perhaps nowhere in the Western Hemisphere, since the abolition of slavery, has personal freedom been so restricted by landed interests as in Central America. Under Barrios's decree of 1878, debtors in Guatemala were legally required to work for their creditors until repayment could be made, with failure to do so constituting a criminal offense. Further, workers labored under multiyear contracts that could not be broken without the consent of the employer. Workers who quit during their contract period or while indebted to the employer could be pursued by the authorities and forced to return to their places of work. Moreover, the cost of being apprehended was added to their debt, which could be legally passed on to their heirs (Whetten 1961, 120). A virtually identical system operated in El Salvador (Browning 1971, 217).

In 1934 the Guatemalan regime formally abolished debt peonage, replacing it with a vagrancy law that achieved the same end. Under this law, any person lacking a "trade or profession" or not cultivating a minimum amount of land was required to seek wage employment for 100 to 150 days a year (the number depending upon the size of the person's landholdings). In practice, the law was applied only to the indigenous population. Each person not exempted by "profession" or landholding had to carry a *libreto* containing his or her employment record. If workers' records were not in order, they could be imprisoned or forced to work on public works without pay.

Although this system was formally abolished in 1945, it is incor-

rect to say that "forced labor in Guatemala virtually came to an end" (Whetten 1961, 122). McCreery concludes that the reforms from 1945 to 1954 threatened the labor control system but "reliance upon extra-economic coercion continues today to characterize Guatemalan owner-laborer relations" (1976, 459). In Guatemala and El Salvador, nonmarket coercion of agricultural labor took the form of the *colono* system. This system had been legally established in Guatemala by the 1878 labor decree and involved long-term contracts that could not be broken by workers. After World War II, the system assumed a less overtly coercive appearance but was no less effective in binding workers to particular estates. Landlords granted land to peasant families for their use, in exchange for which the able-bodied were obligated to work in the coffee fields when required. Valentín Solórzano F., writing in the late 1950s, described this arrangement in Guatemala as "almost patriarchal," one in which landlords served as the civil authority over the lives of their colonos (1963, 381). The *colono* system was also quite important in El Salvador, where it involved 25 percent of rural families as late as 1961 (El Salvador 1978). Usually colonos lived in villages that were legally administered by the *hacendado* (Browning 1971, 170).

Two important aspects of the evolution of coercive labor systems in Central America should be noted. First, these systems were made more rigid by the commercialization of agriculture. Thus rather than becoming a force for modernization in the countryside, production for the world market resulted instead in a reactionary turn toward precapitalist methods of labor control. Second, the role of the state was crucial in fostering and maintaining these systems. Far from stepping aside and "letting market forces rule," Liberal regimes in Central America intervened to prevent the development of capitalism in agriculture.

In light of these two points, one should not interpret the Liberal regimes of the 1870s and 1880s as representing the emergence of capitalism in Central America, as some have suggested.⁹ These regimes certainly facilitated the expansion of coffee production and, therefore, the commercialization of the countryside. Further, this second period of Liberal rule coincided with considerable investment in transport and communications (McCreery 1976). But the social basis of coffee production remained forced labor. Instead of transforming labor relations along capitalist lines, the Liberal regimes codified the coercive labor systems that up to that time had operated largely on the basis of custom.¹⁰ Woodward succinctly captures the philosophy of so-called Central American liberalism: "What emerged were elite oligarchies of planters and capitalists who cynically and without the noblesse oblige of their Conservative predecessors, continued to live off the labor of an oppressed rural population" (1984, 294).

These regimes constructed barriers to capitalist development that

continue in varying degrees to this day. The coercive nature of production relations gave the regimes their uniquely despotic and anachronistic nature. Their character is best described as antidemocratic, based on a political philosophy that predates the Age of Liberalism, and a throwback to feudal despotism. Solórzano Martínez refers to the “closed circle of the political scene” in Central America in this century—the restrictions on participation, fraudulent electoral processes, and endemic violation of human rights—as the modern legacy of the coercive labor systems (Solórzano Martínez 1983, 49). He argues that this closed political environment reflects a “hegemonic” ideology of reactionary conservatism, in which “the attempt is not simply to obtain a general consensus, but rather the capacity to impose by force (repression) the [political philosophy] of the dominant social group” (1983, 54). It is in this sense that Solórzano Martínez employs the term *democracias de fachada*—democratic forms superimposed upon antidemocratic, authoritarian societies.

The Special Case of Costa Rica

The argument that this reactionary, premodern political regime was based on the system of labor control is substantiated by contrasting Costa Rica to the rest of the region. Many explanations have been offered for Costa Rica’s uniquely pluralistic society, from the country’s ethnic homogeneity to its allegedly equitable distribution of wealth and income. The explanation lies in the nature of land tenure and the way in which capitalism developed in Costa Rica.

Because of its remoteness from the colonial center and the absence of an indigenous population of any significant size, Costa Rica had few attractions for the Spanish crown. The Valle Central was occupied by smallholders using family labor, and during the colonial period, forced labor was of little importance. In the middle of the nineteenth century, coffee production spread rapidly in Costa Rica, as in Guatemala and El Salvador. The commercialization of peasant life generated a rapid process of economic and social differentiation as land prices boomed and the cycle in coffee prices generated indebtedness. These economic factors, in the absence of the noneconomic restraints prevailing elsewhere in the region, resulted in a powerful process of land concentration, creating on the one hand a wealthy coffee aristocracy and on the other, landless laborers.¹¹

This development might be called the classic process of class differentiation that the commercialization of peasant life generates when not restrained by extraeconomic coercion. In the Costa Rican countryside, a stratification developed in the population among large landowners, “yeoman” farmers, and landless laborers. In the absence of coer-

cive labor relations, and with an open frontier to the southwest, coffee wages were relatively high even in the nineteenth century, when compared with the rest of the region. A residual independent peasantry, combined with a rural working class free of precapitalist coercion, provided the basis for Costa Rica's pluralistic institutions. It must be stressed, however, that Costa Rican society is characterized by great inequalities. One study indicates that in the early 1970s, the concentration of ownership of agricultural land was as high in Costa Rica as in El Salvador or Guatemala, and the distribution of income was not particularly equitable when compared with the rest of Latin America (Chenery et al. 1974; Weeks 1985, 47).¹² Furthermore, political office in Costa Rica has been dominated by a handful of aristocratic families even after the revolution of 1948 (Seligson 1980, 45). Thus the pluralism of Costa Rica is explained not by the relative concentration of economic power but by the social relations in which that power developed.

In the rest of Central America, the landed oligarchy used its power to maintain precapitalist labor systems within which the agro-export economies developed. The result was a process of economic growth without political or social modernization. The lack of political modernization reflected the antidemocratic character of politics. Social modernization was blocked by the coercive labor systems in the countryside.

Capitalist Development and the Old Order

Central America commercialized in the nineteenth century on the basis of landed property, which adapted to the coffee boom by reinforcing precapitalist labor control systems while abolishing peasant rights to common land. Throughout the nineteenth century, Central American society was ruled by a tight alliance of the coffee aristocracy and urban merchant and financial groups closely linked to the export trade (Browning 1971, 145–47; McCreery 1983). At the end of the century, foreign capital began to penetrate the region, but instead of acting as a force for modernization, it consistently tended to reinforce the power of landed property.

The first incursion of foreign capital came with the banana companies in the last decade of the century, although there were some minor precursors (Mosk 1958, 171). The companies did not employ forced labor on their plantations. But the narrowly based, oligarchic nature of the regimes in Central America complemented the economic interests of the companies. The coercion of the peasantry kept the wages of coffee pickers extremely low,¹³ and this situation in turn ensured a virtually unlimited supply of labor for the banana companies, whose wage levels were higher.

Further, the lack of popular support for the oligarchic regimes rendered them easily dominated by the banana companies. In this century, few governments in the hemisphere have been as closely allied with narrow corporate interests as those in Central America, particularly in Guatemala and Honduras. Only the relation between some of the Caribbean governments and the sugar companies is comparable. The banana companies had little modernizing effect on Central American society partly because they operated as classic enclaves with their plantations geographically isolated. But more decisive was the political orientation of the companies. Modernizing Central America would have required destroying the power of landed property by agrarian reform to generate the kind of class differentiation that occurred in Costa Rica. Through such a differentiation, peasant life would have been commercialized, thus generating a domestic market for industry. This approach was embodied in the Arévalo-Arbenz program for the modernization of Guatemala.¹⁴ But land reform conflicted with the land-extensive production methods of the companies, so the companies joined in opposition to this keystone of modernization.¹⁵

During the banana era (1890–1940), the Central American countryside changed to a limited extent.¹⁶ More influential in changing social relations was the development of cotton production after World War II. The spread of coffee in the nineteenth century had involved forceable dispossession of the peasantry from lands suitable for coffee (except in Costa Rica where economic forces achieved the same result). This dispossession did not cause the peasants to be separated from the land, however; it pushed them onto marginal plots, creating a part-time labor force entangled in coercive social relations.

A further wave of dispossession occurred after World War II in the Pacific lowlands of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, to create the large cotton estates (Wheelock 1979; Browning 1971; Durham 1979). In this case, a permanent class of landless laborers was created. The coffee plantations used wage labor from the outset. Thus the growth of cotton production, unlike the expansion of coffee and bananas, transformed rural society in the zones where cotton developed. Coffee had rigidified labor relations; bananas brought capitalist labor relations, but only to a limited area, leaving conditions elsewhere largely unchanged.

Cotton, too, was based on the large-scale exploitation of land and production for export, which created common interests between the cotton capitalists and the traditional coffee oligarchy. With few exceptions, the two planter classes did not compete over land, for coffee and cotton thrive in different ecological zones. Cotton capitalists also felt threatened by land reform and had little interest in modernizing land tenure outside the cotton zone, which would have commercialized peasant life and expanded internal markets. Thus the particular way in

which capitalism developed in Central America tended to strengthen the rule of the old order. Reactionary despotism, strong in the nineteenth century, grew even more powerful in the twentieth, based on an alliance of landed interests—the coffee aristocracy, the banana companies, and the cotton capitalists. The first major source of economic power not based on exploitation of land emerged in the 1960s, with the formation of the Central American Common Market (CACM).

Nationalists in Central America have attacked the CACM as a vehicle for multinational capital, particularly North American capital, to dominate the economy of the region (Borge et al. 1982, 30). There would seem to be little support for this argument. Prior to the formation of the CACM, in no other part of the hemisphere was North American capital as hegemonic as in Central America, and it is unclear what advantage such capital could gain through regional integration. It is clear that the CACM was implemented in a manner that would minimize any conflict between regional integration and the agro-export economy that was the power base of the landed oligarchy. As Solórzano Martínez points out, the basic formula for the CACM was “industrialization without land reform” (1983, 47), and the domination of landed interests over the regional integration project went beyond blocking land reform. First, the CACM’s protectionist policies were moderate by Latin American standards, maintaining the relative openness of the five economies both individually and taken together (Weeks 1985, chap. 4). While import-substitution industries would not have been viable without tariff protection, studies show that the differential between intra-CACM prices and world prices were relatively modest (BID/INTAL 1973a, 28ff). As a result, the relative profitability of production for extraregional export and intraregional trade did not change dramatically.

Second, steps were taken to ensure that fostering intraregional trade would not rob resources from the agro-export sector. It is the conflict over credit, foreign exchange, and state expenditure on infrastructure that has brought export-producers and capitalists oriented to the internal market into conflict in a number of Latin American countries. This conflict over scarce resources frequently reflects the struggle for economic modernization. Export sectors characteristically have been dominated by a landed oligarchy. In Peru, for example, landed property and foreign mining interests controlled the financial system, starving the manufacturing sector of credit until the coup of 1968 (Dore and Weeks 1976). The growth of import-substitution industries in Central America produced no such modernizing conflict. Domestic credit allocation in the Central American countries continued to favor agro-exporters, both in quantity and in the terms of loans. Meanwhile, foreign capital provided the finance for new industries, so that the growth of

manufacturing did not conflict with the credit needs of the agro-exporters.

Foreign exchange is a resource over which exporters and capitalists oriented to the domestic market have struggled in Latin America. Characteristically, exporters earn foreign exchange and domestic industry consumes it for intermediate inputs and machinery. The struggle by domestic capitalists to redistribute foreign exchange in their favor tends to generate qualitative restrictions that render the national currency effectively nonconvertible except through the state bureaucracy. In Central America, however, every national currency remained freely convertible throughout the effective life of the CACM, with agro-exporters never allowing serious restrictions on the monetary form of their revenues nor on the movement of those revenues in and out of their countries. It is striking that the Central American states are the only underdeveloped countries in the hemisphere to have pursued an import-substitution program with unrestricted exchange rates.¹⁷

A third aspect of the subsumption of the CACM to agro-export interests involved the extensive complementarity between agricultural and manufacturing production. Manufacturing growth within the CACM did not merely represent a development that was tolerated by landed interests; it assumed a pattern from which those interests directly profited. A number of industries fostered by the protectionism of the CACM used by-products or the low-quality output of the export commodities as inputs. In the cotton-producing states (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua), factories were built that rendered cotton seed into cooking oil for the regional market. Throughout the region, low-grade coffee beans, unsalable on the world market, were used for domestically consumed instant coffee. Cattle ranchers (the Somoza family being one of the largest) benefited from selling hides to the protected shoe industry, with high-quality hides being exported and lower grades supplied to domestic factories. Not all manufacturing development within the CACM benefited the agro-exporters. For example, the protected fertilizer and insecticide sectors replaced imports with more costly regional production. But overall, the organization of the CACM reflected the dominance of landed property and its orientation toward extraregional trade.

The commercialization of Central America through coffee, the entry of foreign capital for banana production, and the emergence of cotton as a major export all served to strengthen the hold of landed property over the economic and political life of the region. When industrialization came, it was managed and directed in a manner subservient to landed property, and its modernizing effect on the social system was thereby minimized. In no part of Latin America has the landlord class

been as successful in holding back social and political change as in Central America.

CHALLENGES TO THE OLD ORDER

To this point, the development of "reactionary despotism" in Central America has been treated as if it had progressed smoothly over time. Such a characterization is misleading because the rule of the landed aristocracy has faced major challenges, particularly in the twentieth century. But the landed aristocracy managed to overcome and crush these challenges until the general crisis of oligarchic rule in the 1970s and 1980s. The most important of these unsuccessful challenges were Sandino's rebellion, the Salvadorean peasant revolt, and the reformist regime of Arévalo and Arbenz.

Prior to the 1930s, the armies of the Central American states had been ill-trained, poorly armed, and noncohesive institutions, despite their increased political importance after the 1870s (Woodward 1984, 294–95). These armies were largely pawns in the political game rather than themselves making or breaking governments. Sandino's rebellion and the Salvadorean insurrection of 1932 dramatically and permanently altered the role of the military.

After helping to overthrow Zelaya, North American troops were stationed in Nicaragua in 1912. They numbered only a few hundred for the first ten years and served primarily to prevent intra-oligarchic struggles from destabilizing the president imposed by the United States. In 1925 the foreign troops withdrew, but they returned only a year later to play a considerably expanded role. Responding to popular indignation over the second foreign occupation, Augusto Sandino launched a guerrilla war that eventually drew in several thousand North American troops, supported by air power. By any objective judgement, Sandino defeated the occupying army and forced its withdrawal (Selser 1981).

Sandino's insurrection demonstrated to Washington the limits of a policy of direct military intervention in Central America. To date, this conflict represents the only instance in which U.S. troops fought an extended war in the Western Hemisphere outside U.S. borders. By comparison, the Mexican and Spanish-American Wars were brief interventions. The expense of the Nicaraguan war prompted a shift in policy toward creating professional, U.S.-trained local armies to maintain the established order. This policy was applied with great success within Nicaragua, through the creation of the Guardia Nacional (and the Somoza dynasty). The same policy was subsequently pursued elsewhere in Latin America, expanding dramatically after World War II. U.S. military advisors instructed Central American armies, local officers received

training in the United States and the Canal Zone, and official aid provided armaments. One consequence of this policy was to create armies in Central America with the cohesion and power to impose themselves as institutions upon the political arena.

Although the military hierarchies did not challenge the oligarchic nature of the Central American societies, they sought an active political role. After World War II, the landed oligarchy no longer ruled alone in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador but in alliance with the expanded military establishment. This development resulted in militarizing political life and institutionalizing armed terror to stabilize oligarchic rule. Solórzano Martínez calls this process the “corporatist legitimation” of the political system (1983, 50–51), but I prefer the more straightforward term “militarization of politics.”

Coinciding with the shift in U.S. policy from direct military intervention to fostering local armies was the Salvadorean peasant revolt of 1932, which shook the confidence of the landed oligarchy throughout the region. The Great Depression brought economic hardship to El Salvador, particularly falling wages and unemployment for coffee workers. A mildly reformist oligarch, Arturo Araujo, won election to the presidency in 1930 and proved too tolerant of dissent for the coffee barons. In late 1931, he was deposed by the army and replaced by his vice-president, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, a military man.

A few months later, a general insurrection broke out in the countryside. The uncoordinated revolt never posed a serious threat to the oligarchy, and the victims of the wrath of the peasantry numbered only about thirty. But the rebellion threw the landed oligarchy into a frenzy of repression, and the army retaliated by massacring fifteen or twenty thousand peasants (Anderson 1971). The effect of the insurrection was to transform Salvadorean politics profoundly.¹⁸ The landed oligarchy subsequently lived in fear of a resurgence of popular rebellion. Obsessed by this brief challenge to its rule, the oligarchy ceded considerable freedom of action to the military. After 1932 the military controlled political succession in El Salvador.

Also in Honduras and Guatemala, the combined effect of armies professionalized by the United States and the fear of insurrection made the military the controlling force in political life. This combination of reactionary oligarchic rule through a professionalized military further closed political systems that were already rigidified anachronisms. The rise of the military to influence, ruling to maintain the oligarchic system, implied that force would be required to achieve political change. Defeat of the military and its dismantling thus became a precondition not only for revolution but for modernization and reform in Central America, a reality to this day.

In the four northern states of Central America, the first serious

attempt to reform society occurred immediately after World War II in Guatemala. In 1945 long-reigning dictator Jorge Ubico fell to a coup organized by young, progressive military men. This coup would prove to be perhaps the only instance in the region in which a progressive faction of the military could marshal enough support from within its own ranks to initiate and implement a reform program. The coup leaders passed power to Bermejo Arévalo, who won a landslide victory in Guatemala's first democratic election. By comparison with the social changes introduced after the Mexican Revolution, the reforms of the popularly elected governments of Arévalo and Arbenz (1945–1954) were mild.¹⁹ Both presidents explicitly sought to transform Guatemala into a modern capitalist society with a social democratic orientation. But such a goal attacked the basis of oligarchic rule.

In the 1950s in Central America, liberal capitalism was a revolutionary doctrine, much as it had been in Western Europe two hundred years before. In Guatemala, the alliance based upon landed property and foreign capital (with considerable help from Washington) overthrew the reformist coalition. The counterrevolution restructured society into even more despotic form, ushering in thirty years of state-organized terror. The crucial importance of the Guatemalan military in precipitating the resignation of Arbenz cast doubt on whether moderate reform could be achieved peacefully. In Woodward's words, "for real social and political modernization to take place [in Central America] the military power of the old elites must be eliminated. . . . Failure to do so in Guatemala resulted in reversal of the revolution there" (1984, 300–301).

In several Latin American countries over the last forty years, the military at moments has played a nationalistic, reformist role; one example is the Velasco government in Peru. In Central America, the events of the 1930s forged a powerful, cohesive alliance between the military and the oligarchy that became a formidable bulwark against reform. This cohesive, reactionary role of the military foreclosed the possibility of reform through elections or by *golpe del estado*, a situation implying that social reform would be achieved by the extreme and catastrophic vehicle of civil war.

REACTIONARY DESPOTISM RUNS ITS COURSE

Discussed thus far have been the nature of reactionary despotism in Central America and the reasons why this type of oligarchic rule persisted in the region long after it had largely disappeared elsewhere in the hemisphere. Stated briefly, the argument is that this system persisted because the landed oligarchy in Central America was extraordinarily successful in preventing the development of economic power di-

vorced from property in land, and also when industrialization did occur, it was managed and limited according to the interests of the oligarchy.

Successful as the Central American oligarchy has been in protecting itself against the current of history, there were some changes it could not prevent. Even though based on servile labor, the boom in coffee production brought some limited modernizing tendencies to the region, particularly urbanization and the development of a small middle class in finance and commerce. The expansion of banana production further stimulated growth of the middle class in the cities, as well as creating a rural working class. The rise in importance of cotton reinforced these modernizing tendencies. Moreover, the spectacular growth of industry during the years 1960–1973 accelerated the degree of urbanization, dramatically increasing the importance of the working class and middle classes in the population.

In order to contain these pressures for modernization, particularly the demands by the new groups for political participation, despotic rule became increasingly deformed and idiosyncratic. After World War II, in the four northern countries of the region, forms of political control became increasingly involuted in response to changes that could be postponed only with increasing difficulty. In Nicaragua the struggle against social and political modernization took the form of dynastic rule. During the final years of the Somocista regime, political participation became so narrow that Nicaragua was not even a republic of the oligarchy, but the territory of a family and its court. In Guatemala oligarchic rule based itself increasingly upon terrorizing the population, thus stimulating a series of guerrilla insurrections.

In El Salvador, too, the oligarchy turned to open terrorism to stem the tide of modernization. In the 1960s, a mass-based reformist coalition of the urban working and middle classes emerged, led by Napoleón Duarte and Guillermo Ungo, with the former winning the mayoralty of San Salvador, then the presidential election of 1972 (which the military nullified). Faced with pressures it could no longer contain, the oligarchy adopted the “Guatemalan solution” of state terror, thus polarizing society and plunging the country into a civil war. In 1980 a military junta announced an apparently radical land reform, but the most important part of the reform, that affecting the coffee estates, was soon officially abandoned (Weeks 1985, 121–22; Thome 1984). Civil war itself has nevertheless transformed the Salvadorean countryside to an extent that probably precludes reestablishing the hegemony of the landed oligarchy. In the mid-1980s, the political future remained uncertain at best. Duarte, who in the 1960s and 1970s represented the cause of fundamental reform and the alternative to revolution, became in the 1980s the U.S.-sponsored alternative to both.

Only in Honduras have landed interests attempted to co-opt, rather than crush, the modernizing elements in society. The military government of Osvaldo López Arellano (1963–1971, 1972–1975) introduced a mild land reform, and it is significant that Honduras was the only Central American country that did not experience a guerrilla movement in the 1970s (except Costa Rica, of course). With regard to political stability, the Honduran oligarchy developed an ingenious democratic façade. In practice, the military played the dominant role in politics, not even being constitutionally subservient to the civilian president. At the same time, the two major traditional parties (the Liberals and the Nationals) forged the so-called *Convenio Político*. This pact eliminated overt competition between the parties by means of common electoral lists and proportional division of government posts (Solórzano Martínez 1983, 51).

In the early 1980s, however, oligarchic rule in Honduras faced major destabilizing influences. Honduras had become a permanent base for U.S. military installations and for the operations of a counter-revolutionary force financed by the United States for raiding Nicaragua. The disruptive economic effect alone of such a tremendous inflow of military expenditure has been serious. But much more destabilizing in the long term are the consequences for national pride. Only two other countries in the Western Hemisphere have permitted the establishment of U.S. military bases upon their soil—Cuba and Panama. In both countries, the U.S. military presence proved to be a continuous source of nationalist outrage. The possibility that U.S. military presence in Honduras might breathe life into the insignificant Honduran guerrilla movement is not without irony or historical precedent.

CONCLUSION

Commercialization and capitalist development tend to generate a class differentiation of society that calls forth the political ideology of liberalism. This ideology implies a secular state nominally based upon the principle that governments rule by the consent of the governed, and that the governed are equals before the law. The tension between these principles of eighteenth-century liberalism and the concentration of economic power inherent in capitalist society has been a motive force in the political evolution of Latin American countries away from their feudal Hispanic heritage. By the end of World War II, the elites of Latin America had generally accepted the formalities of liberal ideology and institutions as the unavoidable context within which they would attempt to contain pressures for reform and popular participation.

Not so in Central America, where the principle that governments are based upon general consent is an innovative concept. The old oli-

garchies still rule in Guatemala and Honduras, have yet to concede defeat in El Salvador, and hope for a triumphant and vengeful return to Nicaragua. Even as abstract principles, the ideals of the French Revolution or of the more conservative North American revolution remain radical heresy. North American policymakers have yet to acknowledge the antediluvian nature of the tenacious remains of the old order in Central America, and they continue to formulate tactics and strategy on the basis of the parameters of the status quo. Such myopia was evident in the Carter administration's attempt to achieve a reformist solution in Nicaragua while maintaining the national guard (Booth 1982, chap. 8). The Reagan administration has pursued a similar strategy in El Salvador, seeking social reform and electoral politics within the context of a state and military establishment constructed for oligarchic rule.

The policy failures of the United States in Central America reflect a mistaken conceptualization of the region's history. Except for Costa Rica, Central America is not a land in which the political spectrum can be characterized as having a "left," a "center," and a "right." Instead, on the one hand was the reactionary despotic oligarchy, and on the other, all those who sought political modernization in any form, whatever their ideological orientation might be. Constructed as they were to be impervious to the aspirations of the middle and lower classes, the states of reactionary despotism could only collapse in a general conflagration of the social formation, as occurred in Nicaragua and as is occurring in El Salvador. Whether it will be the modernization program of the left or the right that emerges in each state cannot be predicted. But peaceful modernization is unlikely indeed. Perhaps the most salient characteristic of reactionary despotism in Central America is that in each case this type of state was designed so that it would always be "too late" for peaceful reform.

NOTES

1. The term *country status* is used in place of the vaguer term *nationhood* because I refer to questions such as control of territory, independence of governments, and state institutions as well as to the development of national identity.
2. Good surveys of the colonial period are found in Woodward (1976) and Parker (1964). For more detail, see McLeod (1973) and Browning (1971).
3. The process by which Central America gained independence and the subsequent formation of the federation have been analyzed by many authors. See particularly Karnes (1961).
4. Woodward (1976) and Rodríguez (1965) provide good discussions on this controversial Nicaraguan dictator.
5. See Woodward (1976). More recently Woodward has written, "Without actually hoisting the stars and stripes, Central America became a U.S. colonial domain" (Woodward 1984, 8–9).
6. The term *landlord* does not necessarily imply ownership of land, particularly in the colonial period. See McLeod for a discussion of land tenure and labor systems in the

- seventeenth century (1973, 120–42 and 288–309). Browning treats colonial land tenure in El Salvador in detail (1971, 58ff).
7. The manifesto of this group, *El real consulado*, is discussed in detail in Rodríguez (1978, 25–26).
 8. Opposing the consensus of Central American historians, Wortman states that at the end of the eighteenth century, “the essential nature of labor changed . . . to one of a free market” (1982, 157). In the same book, Wortman subsequently presents evidence contradicting this judgement (178).
 9. This interpretation is put forth by Baloyra (1983) and Solórzano Martínez (1983).
 10. I agree with McCreery that “to see the Revolution of 1871 [in Guatemala] as a ‘bourgeois revolution’ . . . is to misapprehend entirely what occurred. . . . Expanded demand for agricultural products generated within Guatemala a system of production which can be characterized as structural feudalism” (1983, 11–12). He adds later, “Not until the mid-twentieth century have capitalist modes begun to assume a dominant position in Guatemala’s socio-economic formation” (101–2).
 11. According to Seligson, “By 1864, nearly half of the peasants were no longer yeomen” (1980, 23).
 12. Based on 1970 data, the Gini coefficient of land distribution was .59 for all of Central America and .62 for Costa Rica. The value of the index was higher for Costa Rica than for Honduras or Nicaragua (BID/INTAL 1973b).
 13. A study done in the 1950s indicated that wages for coffee pickers in El Salvador were lower by 20 percent than in the Ivory Coast, even though per capita income was higher in El Salvador and its coffee commanded a higher price on the world market than beans from the Ivory Coast (cited in White 1973, 123).
 14. See the discussion of the Arévalo-Arbenz reform program in Schlesinger and Kinzer (1982, chaps. 2 and 3). Rodríguez, who is not particularly critical of the U.S. intervention of 1954, calls the reforms “moderate” (1965, 142).
 15. Referring to Guatemala, Parker writes, “When Ubico was president, the government and United Fruit worked hand-in-hand, both profiting at the expense of the laborer in the fields” (1964, 117). See also Durham’s discussion of how the companies intensified land scarcity in Honduras (1979, 117).
 16. The eventual growth of labor militancy and trade unions on the plantations, particularly a major strike in Honduras in the mid-1950s, presented a challenge to both the banana companies and local landed interests.
 17. The exchange rate between the dollar and the currencies of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua remained the same from the end of World War II until the Nicaraguan *córdoba* was devalued early in 1979. Indeed, the ratio of the dollar to the Guatemalan *quetzal* has been one to one since the latter currency was created in the 1920s. The Costa Rican *colón* has been devalued several times during the postwar period, but it remained freely convertible.
 18. White summarizes the consequence of the peasant revolt with the following commentary: “The course of Salvadorean history changed . . . with the suppression of the rebellion of 1932, after which a new order of things was apparent. After this change, Salvadorean history has been above all else a series of moves or shifts made in relation to a basic conflict between the privileged attempting to maintain their privileges and the representatives of the interests of the underprivileged” (1973, 95).
 19. While highly critical of the Guatemalan land reform for its “political” orientation and its alleged communist influence, Whetten concludes that the reform was less radical than the one carried out in Mexico (1961, 163ff).

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