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Review/Reseña

Elizabeth Dore, *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

Engendering the History of Rural Nicaragua

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This book is an important contribution to the sparse archival based, regional historiography of Nicaragua. Based on impressive and extensive local archival and ethnographic sources, *Myths of Modernity* provides a detailed local history of coffee production, land, labor and gender relations in the village of Diriomo (Granada) between the mid 19th century and the early 20th. The book's seven chapters (plus introduction and conclusion) review the history of commercial agriculture, labor use, and land privatization from the late colonial period to the early twentieth century. The first chapter discusses the theoretical debates addressed by the book. Chapter two discusses the importance of collective landownership to

Diriomo's indigenous community and racial identity. The next chapter examines local politics and patriarchal relations. In chapter four Dore discusses the privatization of land through the simultaneous creation of small peasant holdings and larger coffee farms. The transformation of gender relations, marriage and property ownership under liberal rule is the subject of chapter five. Finally, chapters six and seven discuss how patriarchal/peonage-based labor relations came to dominate the coffee economy.

The important claim that men across classes agreed, despite their differing economic interests, that women and children should be under their undisputed tutelage, is an important one especially for this literature on land and labor in Central America which rarely discusses questions of gender and patriarchy. Echoing the work of other social historians of gender, a shared culture of patriarchy softened the effects of class subordination for male peasants.

The book's empirical discussion is framed (some readers might say, overdetermined) by two intertwined theoretical discussions that nearly overshadow Diriomo's relatively small scale as a case study. The first polemic draws on what most historians of Latin America will see as a dated and essentialist debate on the capitalist/non-capitalist development path of rural pre-capitalist societies. *Myths of Modernity* concludes that Nicaragua did not follow a path of agrarian capitalism because Diriomo's labor relations were based on patriarchal debt-peonage. The review of the theoretical debates on the development of capitalism seems limited and does not consider many post-Brenner (1979) debates on the study of the relationship between rural labor and capitalism. The book's second theoretical discussion relates to the role of patriarchal relations within capitalist development and indigenous culture. The author argues that the confluence of patriarchy from both above and below is what created an obstacle to the development of agrarian capitalism (read, free wage relations) in Granada. Here, the empirical materials seem to suggest a far richer conceptual and theoretical discussion than what the author offers in

the concluding chapter. The discussion of race and ethnicity and some of the historiographical discussions are all too brief and seem tacked on and detached from the discussion of the case material and of Nicaraguan historiography in general.

The book suffers from a persistent tendency to posit social relations as having unequivocally singular meanings, not open to duality or ambiguity and definitely not compatible with a complex field that yields contradictions, even though in the conclusion of each chapter the author stresses the contradictory character of the processes and outcomes. Wages and “peonage” are mutually exclusive. This leads the author to dismiss much of her own evidence about how the period studied represents a changing transition, a dynamic history in which the 1870s do not necessarily resemble the 1920s. Her emphasis is on continuity and the *grosso-modo* characterization of the entire period for purposes of refuting the capitalist path thesis. Dore finds persistence in the use of non-market, coercive mechanisms to extract labor, especially the labor of women, first within the patriarchal indigenous community and later in the downward mobility of peasants and their dependence on commercial farmers. According to Dore “from 1870 to 1930, class relations between coffee planters and debt peons were regulated directly through the exercise of patriarchal forms of coercion and consent, not indirectly by market mechanisms” (3). The state, both local and national, played a critical role in regulating this coercive/paternalist consent dynamic, bringing the study of at least this region of Nicaragua closer to the *regional* experience of portions of western Guatemala. Her discussions of land privatization and its effects are especially compelling. But the arguments relating to the primacy of coercion, peonage and debt in securing peasant labor for the elite’s farms and estates is less convincing. Mexican regional historiography has noted how peonage and debt forms existed in a varying continuum with “free” wage labor, and that the presence of debts and other forms of legal compulsion do not necessarily indicate the existence of a full fledged peonage system in which workers are physically bound to estates,

something which Dore does not find in Diriomo. The decline (abrupt ending, it seems) of Diriomeño indigenous identity can be traced to the dissolution of the community's communal landholding. Dore posits a less subtle and less political path to mestizaje, one that did not seem to require engagement with the political web woven by mestizo politicians, lawyers and finqueros noted by Gould, for example.¹

Like all single-sited monographs that attempt to make claims about national development, the argument in *Myths of Modernity* is not completely convincing when extended to the national or even regional level. It is important to note here the distinct differences in argument between *Myths of Modernity* and those provided for nearby Carrazo by Charlip.² The book is also written in a way that is non-conversant with the greatly expanded literature (since the late 1980s) that discusses the social history of coffee, peasants and Indians in Central America. The discussion of Gould's work at the end of the conclusion somewhat misrepresents his work and seems to make a tremendous effort to distinguish what in the end are only differences in nuance (170-171).

An additional theme frames the book. The author finds, like Gould and others before her, that the agrarian policies of the Sandinista government were limited by the view of some Sandinista leaders that rural capitalism had all but destroyed the peasantry and indigenous people at the end of the nineteenth century. Guided by this mistaken view they failed to promote the distribution of land to peasants on an individual basis. This oft-repeated critique of the FSLN's agrarian policies actually had more complex roots in the Frente's ideological composition and the class orientation of its leaders, and overemphasis on Wheelock's history book as the single intellectual source of his agricultural policies is debatable.

Altogether, *Myths of Modernity* represents an important contribution to Central American history, one that should be taken—albeit

¹ Jeffrey L. Gould, *To die in This Way Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880–1960*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

² Julie A. Charlip, *Cultivating Coffee: The Farmers of Carrazo, Nicaragua, 1880–1930* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003).

critically--as a model for future work that seeks in-depth ethno-historical study of gender-informed political economy.