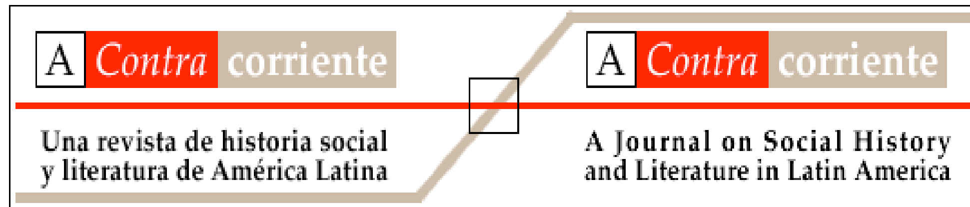

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Review/Reseña

Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule*. Durham:Duke University Press, 2005.

A Promise of Historiographical Renewal for a New Generation of Radical Historians

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Context

There was a time—and it wasn't so long ago—when many historians chose to write social history. The tools of the trade were often Marxist terms of analysis. These historians tried to tell the history 'from the bottom rail up." They tried to narrate their histories from the perspective of class and, in that process, rescue lost or unheard voices from "the enormous condescension of posterity," as E.P. Thomson famously put it. In short, these historians tried to review the past from the vantage point of those who struggled for power, for identity, for sovereignty, for liberty, for dignity, and for historical agency. Sometimes the historical actors, the

subjects of these histories, succeeded; more often they did not. But in the recounting of the tale the historian would shed light on the possibilities of the past and, in that way, also shed light on the possibilities of today and tomorrow.

Time moved on, the *zeitgeist* shifted, and soon these historical methods were seen as antiquated, as imperfect, quaint, and epistemologically naïve. The practitioners of historical inquiry moved on, adapting novel and more modern tools of analysis: enter post-modernism, deconstruction, the 'linguistic turn,' and de-centered cultural analyses. Derrida, Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Lacan, Foucault were the new prophets. Text and context, the evanescence of textual certainty, intentionality and reception, marked out new fields of inquiry. Accompanying this enormous paradigm shift (indeed, essential to it) was the elephant that was no longer in the room. Socialism and the idea that human beings could construct socialist societies fell out of favor. Indeed, that's putting it mildly. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc collapsed as a viable social project. The bloc's constituent parts disintegrated into new national formations and, as nationalism and xenophobia rose over the smoldering ashes of the former structures, competing sectors of capitalist-oriented elites struggled for hegemony. And in the Peoples Republic of China, it became "glorious to be rich" and grafted onto a repressive state apparatus came a new technical mandarin class who served to guide and protect the flow of brutal market forces. This profound shift, the collapse of the socialist project, of course, undergirded the analytical transformation of the historical arts. While history exams in the universities of the U.S.S.R. in 1990 were canceled, sages in the West triumphantly announced the impending "end of history." Free markets, democratic structures, and the technicians who managed them were the glorified custodians who would prepare the holy grounds for this new millenarian stage of the citizen-consumer. In the periphery, too, the socialist dream lay dying amid the apparently universal clarion call for free markets and attendant structural adjustments.

But the worm has turned. The inevitable clarity attendant to the purging fire of market forces has only made the waters—in the north and south—more turbid; the adaptation of so-called democratic structures has

been neither benign nor democratic; and the triumphalist celebrations of capitalism and the end of history are all but drowned out now in long term structural conundrums and unending global wars of uncertain direction and extraordinary violence. It ought to be said that opposition to neoliberal ideas has been present since the beginning of this epoch. Sometimes the opposition has been expressed timidly in the corridors of power and in muted tones in the academy; more often it has been expressed in the streets, the fields, and the remote redoubts of the developing world. Sometimes it is expressed in the language of religious millenarianism, sometimes in the language of secular and, yes, socialist opposition. Nowhere has that latter voice been more prescient and more boldly declamatory than in Latin America. And this rejection comes not from alternative think tanks and democratic-centralist insurgent movements. Rather it comes from the bottom up, from a profound, popular understanding that the ideas spouted by power—and those who serve as power's underlings—serve capital and not truth. For every Lula, Evo Morales, Hugo Chávez, Tabaré Vásquez, Rafael Correa, there are hundreds of thousands of their compatriots, men and women who have mobilized around core ideas that reject the neoliberal model. In turn, all these voices, both the fundamentalist and secular variants, have had a powerful effect upon the ideologues of power. The first prophet of the end of history, Francis Fukuyama, is now an apostate and his followers are uncertain and the world is, once again, changing. Historians are once again in search of new, more illuminating models that shed light on questions of power, class and empire.

But the fact remains that young historians, looking for work in the past fifteen to twenty years needed to be conversant in the de-centering values of post-modern and subaltern theory. Pierre Bourdieu was in this period on the cutting edge and E. P. Thompson was, definitively, not. In the hiring interviews the nuances of theory, gender, race, post-colonialism, alterity, and cultural production trumped political, economic, and class analysis. In the fields of Latin American colonial history, for example, newly minted PhDs often knew more about, say, the culture of convents and *cofradías* than they did about the political economy of colonial

extraction. Literary parsings, say, of Huaman Poma de Ayala and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca often were more central to these young scholars' worldview than viceregal structures, 16th century insurgencies, and international rivalries for empire. The modern 'archaeology of knowledge' might reveal interesting historical phenomenon but its powers were often far removed from chronology and causation and nothing could be more disdained by the high priests of this new esoterica than the vulgar search for a usable past.

Text

It is along these lines of thought that I wish to review Michel Gobat's *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under the U. S. Imperial Rule.* It is not incidental that this important work is published in the American Encounters series of Duke University Press. Duke's Latin American catalog, under the leadership of Gil Joseph and Emily Rosenberg, has been on the cutting edge of Latin American history in the recent past. Nowhere has the historiographic transition from social to cultural and, back again, to political and economic analyses been navigated with more resources than in this press. Gobat's work reflects, I think, an emerging new historiographic synthesis that bodes well for historical inquiry and the renewed belief in the virtues of historical inquiry (11).

Gobat's purpose in writing this book is to describe the combustible and unintended impact of the marriage of ideas of 'modernity,' in the guise of U.S. culture, and the imperial interventions, in the guise of US economic and political prescriptions enforced by military occupations, upon Nicaragua over the past century and half. In the heart of the book, he argues that the landed elite centered in Granada and politically mobilized into the Conservative Party—perhaps the staunchest and most sympathetic ally to US ideas of modernity and development in Nicaragua—inexorably came to the conclusion that their interests lay more with Augusto César Sandino's guerrilla war against US military intervention and, later, with the Sandinista revolution of the 1970s and 1980s than with an alliance with the rhetoric and interests of corporate and financial power in the United States. The study focuses on how Nicaraguans "experienced and confronted U.S.

intervention (1)" and why the "U.S. occupation of 1912-1933 push[ed] Nicaragua's wealthiest and most Americanized elites to turn against the U.S. ideals of modernity…thus transforming them from leading supporters of U.S. imperial rule into some of its greatest opponents" (2). Along these counter-intuitive lines, Gobat reminds us of the long and brutal imperial legacy that continues to link the United States to Nicaragua and to the greater Caribbean Basin. Finally, in the epilogue, Gobat makes explicit the linkage of this history to today's imperial 'blowback' of unintended global consequences. Indeed, implicit to Gobat's analysis is a perversion if not inversion of Thucydides dictum that "large nations do as they wish while small nations do as they must": over the *longue durée*, Gobat suggests, small nations do as they must, but large nations do not always do as they wish. In the study of U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, he argues, the seeds of U.S. failure in the larger arenas of today are present. Interestingly enough, this is much the same conclusion to be found in the more polemical study of U.S.-Central American relations in Greg Grandin's *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (Metropolitan Press, 2006).

Gobat opens his book with the methodological, historiographical and analytical premises of his study. While occasionally overwrought, the introduction contains an essential reminder: the distinct "modes of U.S. incursion in Nicaragua [from Cornelius Vanderbilt and William Walker to William Howard Taft to Ronald Reagan and Bush the Elder] were fundamentally related to each other…and occurred in the broader geographical and historical context of U.S. efforts to forge an informal empire in the Caribbean Basin (9)." Empire, then, was an intrinsic part of the U.S. mission in the western hemisphere from early on in our Republic's history. It was neither incidental nor accidental. From this clarification, Gobat vigorously defends the focus of his study [the Granadan elite] by pointing out that

> the impact of imperialism on subjugated nations can be best understood by analyzing local sources that illuminate the experiences and views of those subjected to imperial rule. While this might sound like an obvious point, many studies of U.S. occupation in Latin America continue to rely disproportionately on U.S. sources and, therefore, to privilege North American viewpoints.

> Such an imbalance frequently reflects scholars' greater interest in the U.S. experience or strategies of imperial rule…Thanks to…newly accessible Nicaraguan sources, this study is in better position to show how the paradoxical outcomes of U.S. imperial rule were shaped by Nicaraguans' own contradictory and multifaceted engagements with distinct modes of U.S. domination (14-15).

With his intentions made clear, Gobat gives an historical overview of how the California Gold Rush made the isthmian passage in Nicaragua become a crucial geopolitical link for the architects of empire in North America. Taking advantage of the incipient civil war between the Nicaraguan Liberals from León and Conservatives from Granada, the Tennessee-born freebooter and stalking horse for Southern empire, William Walker, set up a short-lived gringo enclave in Nicaragua. Opposed by the British, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Central Americans in general, Nicaraguan Conservatives from the beginning and Liberals belatedly, Walker's imperial ambitions ended badly for him in 1860. Soon, the Civil War in the U.S. ended the cycle of U.S. filibusters that characterized the antebellum years.

The landed oligarchs in Nicaragua, both Liberal and Conservative, alarmed at the reach of the Colossus of the North, spent considerable political capital in the next half-century to develop a *modus vivendi* to insure domestic political stability in the face of foreign encroachment. Indeed, Managua became the compromise capital of the nation, situated between—metaphorically and literally—León and Granada. In the north, the U.S., preoccupied with the reinvention of its own elite, was for the moment incapable of concerted imperial aggression outside of its own borders. But with renewed appetite, in the wake of the War of 1898 and the invention of Panama, the U.S. soon again began to develop a coherent if malignant policy towards Nicaragua. To the great chagrin of Nicaraguans, the locus of the inter-oceanic canal became Panama and the U.S. then spent considerable energy insuring, first through diplomacy then through military intervention, that an alternative canal, up the San Juan to Lake Nicaragua and westward from there, would not be built. This is the intent of the overthrow of José Santos Zelaya in 1909.

So far, the narrative that Gobat sketches is familiar to students of empire and of Central America. But the fundamental strand in Gobat's

argument now is put into sharp relief and this is what will make his study original. Maturing with the growth of the agro-export sector in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the developmental dreams of a Nicaraguan canal, the nation's elites began to believe in something they—and Gobat—call cosmopolitanism (42-3, 46-54). This constellation of ideas, combining the economic and the cultural, imagined a "culture of modernity" and gave rise to a "bourgeois spirit" (58-66). To that end, these elites embraced North American values of consumption, education, leisure activity, and celebrations of the entrepreneurial spirit. Nowhere, perhaps, was this spirit so pronounced as among the Granadan elite which was the cutting edge of the new agro-export economy. But now with the dashed hopes for the Nicaraguan canal, renewed U.S. military interventions and occupations, and fiscal and political projects designed by U.S. bankers and diplomats, there emerged a profound alienation of Nicaragua's elites from the U.S. project. Again, nowhere was this alienation so profound and so unexpected as within the Granadan oligarchy. And it began to manifest itself in a surprising and seemingly contradictory array of tendencies: a militant Catholicism that not only embraced reunification of Church and State but also saw the Church, with the 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum novarum,* as a champion of artisanal and workers' rights, a growing antagonism towards U.S. policy; and a growing ambivalence about the role of women in public life and discourse. It was both progressive and reactionary and it found its first major expression in the surprising alliance of the Conservative José Mena with the Liberal Benjamín Zeledón in the civil war of 1912. This was a genuine popular insurrection against the U.S.-supported Adolfo Díaz regime and some of its most violent episodes were orchestrated, Gobat demonstrates, by Granadan Conservatives (103-110). It was only through a U.S. military occupation that the insurrection was quelled. Although the U.S. prevailed in this struggle it "gravely underestimated the populace's ability to resist imperial and oligarchic positions" (76) and this struggle foreshadowed a growing alliance between seemingly disparate and irreconcilable forces in Nicaraguan society; namely, entrenched Conservative elements of the Granadan landed elite and the peasant and popular army of Augusto César Sandino.

This is the center of the book's contribution to the history of this period. Gobat, rather than concerning himself with peasant resistance and militancy in Sandino's Army of Free Men in the Segovias, sketches out the complex and contradictory gyrations of the Granadan elite as it reinvented itself. It is the tale of a paradox, of a reactionary, elitist, and capitalist segment of Nicaraguan society that tried to hitch its fortunes to the anti-imperialist and socialist Sandinsta wagon. Gobat displays a profound command of archival resources in arguing that U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and particularly, U.S. dollar diplomacy through control of the Banco Nacional and the Mixed Claims Commissions "ensured that economic nationalism became the binding ideology for local resistance to U.S. imperial rule" (126). These policies, theoretically designed to "depoliticize" public finances, achieved the opposite effect and increasingly economic nationalism began to be filtered through an anti-Wall Street, anti-modernist discourse. This discourse, through politics and literature, was articulated most consistently by the Granadan Conservative elite. Paradoxically, this anti-U.S. rhetoric did not initially resonate with Nicaragua's smaller agriculturalists who were the unintentional beneficiaries of the strictures of dollar diplomacy. Ironically, it was these precise policies that helped "trigger the anti-American turn of the country's most pro-U.S. elites" (174).

Gobat now adds to his economic analysis a compelling cultural argument and tells of the emergence of the *Caballeros Católicos*, a corporatist movement centered in Granada and led by the region's old Conservative elite. This group, facing both a sustained economic crisis engendered by U.S. policy and the Great Depression and a loss of their traditional patriarchal control, constructed an increasingly comprehensive anti-modernist, anti-American discourse. Freemasons and Baptists were undermining the moral authority of the Church. In turn, the Church was central to the wellbeing of the nation. "Modern women," particularly those of the elite—with their habits of consumption, political engagement, and recreational behaviors—were infected with U.S. values and undermined the traditional authority of men [again, particularly elite men] and thus the wellbeing of the nation. And Wall Street's economic prescriptions and U.S.

insistence on "democratic" political culture were bleeding the country of the traditional corporatist culture that offered the only way out of nation's crisis. This construction also had a literary project. Novels were written that valorized—and mythologized—the cattle ranches of Chontales as "the embodiment of egalitarianism, social justice, and Christian values" (194). These novels gave "idyllic portrayals of rural society (194-97)" that were nationalist inventions of tradition. From the Right, the elite were forging an anti-modern critique against cosmopolitanism and the "bourgeois spirit" of U.S. influences. From the Left, in the Segovias, Sandino and the Army of Free Men, were fighting an anti-imperialist struggle against that same bourgeois spirit inculcated by that same U.S. imperialism. Both groups were convinced that U.S.-designed democratic values would be toxic to the project of national sovereignty. Their identity of interests were sufficient, Gobat writes, to draw them together in mutual struggle; their dissimilarities were such to doom their alliance. The Corporatist Right drew away from the Communitarian Left and this provided an opening for Anastasio Somoza and the U.S. engineered National Guard to murder Sandino and massacre his followers at Wiwilí. But the fact that a common struggle was envisioned and taken seriously at times by both forces "underscores how strongly U.S. imperial rule had pushed Conservative oligarchs to turn against the American dream that they had valorized for so long" (266).

Like any good history, Gobat's concluding remarks in the epilogue ("Dictatorship and Revolution") open new questions and suggest new historiographic vistas rather than simply restate the work's thesis. After a brief, indeed cursory, account of the years of the Somoza dynasty, Gobat sketches out, and documents, the phenomenon of—and the historical continuities attendant to—Conservative support for the FSLN-led government of 1979-1990. This is buttressed by a theoretical and historiographic review. Finally Gobat leaves us with some words on the "Price of Empire." His closing words contextualize the history, offering a powerful review of our historical *zeitgeist:*

> ...U.S. imperial rule in the Caribbean Basin did not just fail to make things better; it made things worse. Consider, for example, the

> illiberal effects the U.S. occupation had on Nicaragua. In trying to remake Nicaragua into a "little United States," the occupiers not only cut short the country's first major democratic opening and helped produce three devastating wars, they also undermined the rule of law by politicizing state institutions; stymied economic development by blocking much-needed public improvements; and fatally militarized state-society relations by seeking to impose democracy by force. As this and other case studies suggest, the peoples of the Caribbean Basin paid a high price for U.S. imperial rule. In fact, some prominent scholars [Gobat cites Coatsworth and Lafeber] argue that it is precisely because of U.S. dominance that "America's backyard" suffered unusually high levels of social inequality, political violence, and authoritarian rule during much of the twentieth century.
>
> The history of the first U.S. overseas empire thus serves as a powerful reminder of the limits and perils of liberal imperialism. However much contemporary promoters of a U.S. "empire of liberty" showcase the U.S. occupations of Japan and Germany as models of U.S. liberal imperial rule, its more typical examples were the string of protectorates that the United States established in the Caribbean Basin during the early twentieth century. And the tragic fate of these protectorates not only underscores the grave challenges that an imperial power faces in reshaping weaker nations, it also exposes the devastating, illiberal effects of liberal imperialism...
>
> No public debate about the wisdom of contemporary U.S. "empire of liberty" will be very meaningful if it ignores Latin America's extensive experience with U.S. intervention. After all, few better foresaw the perils of such an empire than Latin America's independence hero Simón Bolívar, who in 1829 prophesized that the Unites States would "plague [Latin] America with torments in the name of freedom. (279-280)

This is a history that ends by encouraging historians, students, and citizens to engage in a much needed debate about the folly of U.S. imperial adventures. This is indisputably a good thing.

Exceptions

I do take some exceptions to this book. In descending order of importance: First, I think that there is a tendency in Gobat to be too trusting about the 'cover story' for imperial intervention. Gobat throughout the narrative seems to take the U.S. "democratizing" mission at face value (205-216, 269-271). At one point he suggests that the U.S. did not "set up the Guardia to become, as is often alleged, a pillar of authoritarian rule"

(270). This formulation implicitly suggests that the rule of Trujillo, Pérez Jiménez, Papa Doc, Batista, and los Somozas were the unintended rotten fruit of U.S. policy rather than the logical—and intended—consequences of an imperial policy that consistently valued stability over democracy and human rights. This notion of unintended consequences is often used by U.S. historians to shroud the real intent of U.S. policy in the Americas and beyond (a recent expression of this idealism can be found in the otherwise instructive essay *Unintended Consequencs: The United States at War* by Kenneth Hagan and Ian Bickerton (Reaktion Books, 2007). Second, one of the great tragedies of U.S. historical narratives is our inability—even when we have a great story—to shape it into a gripping historical narrative. This is a generic problem that has many roots but there are times—for example when Gobat deploys his extensive archival findings to make a subtle economic argument (125-149)—that the narrative tension disintegrates for all but the most attentive reader. Likewise, in Chapter Seven, when Gobat makes an important point about the elite "crisis of manhood" and describes the concerted attack on "modern women" there is a seeming interruption in the narrative's pace that could be discouraging to some readers. For these reasons, and for only these reasons, I might be reluctant to assign this book to lower-division students. Third, as I was reading this book, I was waiting for Rubén Darío's clarifying and magnificent lines in his 1904 "A Roosevelt" or a wider discussion about the elite embrace of the ideas of *mestizaje* (255-259) that would make comparative reference, even in passing, to José Vasconcelos and Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre as they tried, like Darío, to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, Christ and Nezahualcoyotl, the conqueror and the conquered, into an alliance against "el futuro invasor de la América ingenua." Finally, this book would have been well served by a comprehensive political map of Nicaragua. For example, the location of Corinto—which plays a key role on several occasions—is left to the reader's imagination.

But in the final analysis, this is a fine work. It augurs well for the historical arts that here, in the sinus cavities of the monster, *Confronting the American Dream* has been published by Duke University Press. The almost universal enthusiastic reception of Gobat's socially conscious

historicism is a harbinger, I think, of a new cohort of historians who will be more successful than the previous generation of navigating themselves successfully out of the sterile shoals of post-modernist scholasticism and the aesthetics of nihilistic deconstruction. Gobat's work is emblematic of a new, important, robust, and multidisciplinary approach to questions of yesterday and today.