



Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 2012, 610-614
www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Nolan-Ferrell, Catherine A. *Constructing Citizenship: Transnational Workers and Revolution on the Mexico-Guatemala Border, 1880-1950*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012.

Not Just Anybody Can Pick Coffee: How Transient Workers Became Card-Carrying National Subjects

Terry Rugeley

University of Oklahoma

That peculiar region that lies southeast of the Mexican *altiplano* and north of Colombia—call it Mayab, call it the greater isthmus, call it the lower Mesoamerican subcontinent—bears a curiously dual nature. Blessed with the benefits of all things tropical, its people have also had to endure some of the most terrible suffering in a hemisphere that wears so many misfortunes on its sleeve. In this new study of Mexican-Guatemalan labor relations, Catherine Nolan-Ferrell reminds us that on top of all else, the little people of the border region have confronted the problems generated

by nationalism and border-bounding. Specifically, she looks at the way that conditions in the Soconusco coffee industry fluctuated according to the way that national identities were assigned, adopted, and manipulated by involved parties. While national belonging at times inconvenienced workers, those same workers at times took advantage of emerging national policies to gain more favorable conditions.

The southern Chiapas region of Soconusco belongs to that group of places distinguished by being in-between, like the Acadian region of eastern Canada, or the border communities along the Río Grande. Originally part of the Captaincy of Guatemala, after 1821 a group of elites found it in their advantage to support Iturbide's absorption of Guatemala, and held to that loyalty even after Iturbide himself fell. Little by little, Mexico, far better endowed with resources and population, consolidated its control over Chiapas and Soconusco, even as Guatemala continued to maintain a largely theoretical claim over the area. The matter only came to rest with the 1882 recognition of the Suchiate River as the official boundary between the two nations. The true extent of Guatemala's loss became all the more apparent as Soconusco emerged as a significant coffee producer in the late nineteenth century. For a long time both nations were planter societies, with all the now familiar legal mechanisms used to keep their strongly indigenous workers in debt and on the estates. By after 1914, Chiapas began to experience revolutionary changes such as the abolition of peonage, the rise of workers' rights, and campaigns for land reform. Guatemala, meanwhile, remained an oligarchic backwater with liberation nowhere in sight.

The objects of so much political passion, the coffee pickers themselves never fit easily into the mold of nationalism. Poor and frequently transient, they had never worried too much about whether they belonged to one country or another. Their diminutive stature, swarthy features, and deficient Spanish clearly separated them from the coffee growers on either side of the Suchiate, and if some of them did not wander between Mexico and Guatemala, they lived and labored besides others who did. All of this began to change when the revolutionary Mexican state began to hold out benefits for its people; reactionary Guatemalan leaders

had no intention of imitating such offers, and the workers soon found themselves divided up and marked by identity cards. Predictably, everyone found ways to work the system. Mexican growers at times claimed that their workers were Guatemalan, and hence ineligible to claim land and labor rights. "Guatemalan" could mean indigenous, or it could mean pro-German. By the early 1940s, when Mexico moved rightward and Guatemala experimented with its own revolution, the former learned to scapegoat the latter as part of some nebulous "red menace."

The reader finds few united or homogenous social groups here. Planters often broke down per Mexican or Guatemalan nationality; moreover, some manifested express loyalties to their German mother countries, while for others, the Germany in them amounted to little more than an unpronounceable last name. Still, their shared interest in keeping labor cheap, docile, and plentiful probably made planters the more unified of Soconusco interests. Mexico's revolutionary state, as we all now know, churned with contrasting ideologies and personalist loyalties. Any revolutionary policies of the national government (land reform and worker identity cards, for example) had to pass through skeptical local officials. Uncarded workers who traveled from one side of the border to the other could always say that they were simply following the planter's instructions. National direction also tended to drift from reformist to radically populist to the far more conservative wartime values of unity and productivity. Mexican enforcement of identity cards tended to be lax, since 'illegal' immigrant labor kept the Soconusco estates running and the labor costs low; Guatemalan officials, to the contrary, followed identity papers obsessively, since vagrancy laws formed the backbone of the nation's internal recruitment system. Most importantly, workers themselves splintered into different groups. Concern over who was Mexican and who was Guatemalan did eventually grow. The land reform program favored landless villagers to receive *ejidos*, or government-insured land titles, and this policy invariably penalized estate workers. In some cases the latter were indeed in the planter's back pocket, as many revolutionaries alleged, but in other cases they were simply disadvantaged coffee pickers who found themselves shut out of the benefits program. Estate workers could found

unions, which occasionally benefitted from the new practice of government arbitration; but when the plantation became an ejido, hired workers often found conditions under ejido officials worse than the old system. This kaleidoscope of interests and beliefs grew all the more complicated with the highly unstable coffee prices that made one year's bonanza the next year's economic liability.

In other words, things did not always go swimmingly. Still, Nolan-Ferrell pays a certain grudging respect to the Mexican Revolution. While complaints and lawsuits abounded, *on the whole* the situation of border-area coffee pickers did improve. Peasants seeking land allied with the Mexican federal government, and ultimately gained the upper hand over Soconusco growers. Government mediation *did* manage to halt some of the worst abuses that beset these people. The land and labor reforms also endowed the Mexican government with a level of legitimacy unrivaled before or since. It is certainly true that revolutionary policies bore unintended consequences, such as pushing landless workers into the Selva Lacandona; but no reform lacks its blowback, and all land tenure systems are a transition to something else. Stated otherwise, the Revolution really did improve peoples' lives, and deserves to salvage some of the respect that a recent generation of historians has dedicated themselves to throwing out the window.

There is much to savor here, and much to wonder about. Although the book concerns border relations, it focuses overwhelmingly on the Mexican side, with Guatemalan perspectives only peeping out here and there. Perhaps this is natural, given Mexico's greater size and dynamism, and greater ability to generate and archive records of the past, while Mexican territory is the basic scene of contention. But a bit more about the Guatemalan side would help. We do learn something about the way the Guatemalan State tried to foster national identity *à la* nineteenth-century liberalism via celebrations of independence day, or the birthday of planter-president Justo Rufino Barrios (imagine the apathy this fiesta must have generated!), but these campaigns appeared stillborn among peasants and tightly knit German planters. Though not specifically stated here, the radical program of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) was

undoubtedly instrumental in inspiring Guatemala's Ten Years of Spring (1944-1954), an astonishing if short-lived attempt to reverse a century of creeping planterocracy, and even in its overthrow a reminder of the Guatemalan people's imperative to find a better way to live. I was also intrigued by Nolan-Ferrell's observation that we know little of how the 1954 overthrow of revolutionary reformer Jacobo Arbenz pushed Guatemalans into Mexico in record numbers; perhaps this is a challenge that the author herself plans to take up in the future, and if so, that can only be a good thing. If I have a complaint about *Constructing Citizenship*—aside from the overworked technique of crafting history titles out of gerunds—it is the overly dissertational introduction. Most of these seventeen pages read like someone's general exams, adorned with all the terminologies of citizenship and state-formation, together with the names of their foremost practitioners. A more direct narrative approach, one less self-consciously focused on situating itself in the profession, would have made for better reading. These minor complaints notwithstanding, Nolan-Ferrell reminds us that southeastern history (adopting the Mexican perspective) necessarily involves international and border issues. The fact that a vast multi-ethnic colony gave birth to the individual nation, "foremost among the beasts of the earth for pride," forces the scholar to include rivalries and contrasting legal structures in the quest for a more complete knowledge.