H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffery M. Paige. *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. xv + 432 pp. $26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-13649-6; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-13648-9.

Reviewed by David M. McCreery (Georgia State University)

Published on H-LatAm (May, 1998)

After several decades of Central American history "from the bottom up," it is well to remind ourselves that elites matter too. In *Coffee and Power*, Prof. Jeffery M. Paige, a sociologist at the University of Michigan, undertakes to explain how and why the perceptions of Central America's coffee elites of themselves and of their situation changed in the half century after 1930 and how and why they acted on these new understandings. He approaches this on two axes, testing the well-known theories of Barrington Moore on the origins of democracy as well as exploring the concepts of "narrative" (p. 47) and "ideology" (p. 339) as keys to elite consciousness. In fact, however, Paige looks not at the coffee elites of Central America, but only at those of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Honduras never developed an important coffee industry, but to find Guatemala excluded from a study of regional coffee elites will startle most readers. And Guatemala does force its nose back under the tent flap on several occasions, notably in Chapter 2 "Class and Class Relations." More broadly, though, Prof. Paige chose not to discuss Guatemala both because it did not fit his paradigm–its "large indigenous population…makes it in many respects a special case" (p. 6)–and because the socio-political model he develops has room for only three variations. Sociologists can do this.

The argument is straightforward: Coffee's expansion in late nineteenth/early twentieth century El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica generated landed "agrarian" (p. 8) elites that dominated these countries economically and politically until the 1930s. When the Depression hit, however, each national elite had a unique response: in El Salvador, repression of a popular uprising brought the Army into politics, and today the memory of the revolt still is used to justify a racist and paranoid anti-communism; in Nicaragua, United States intervention stifled the development of a strong elite, paving the way for family dictatorship and a cynical and unconvincing anti-communism; and in Costa Rica, communist-inspired reforms promoted a middle class counter-revolution that, nevertheless, produced a system of government economic regulation and social welfare unparalleled in the region. By the 1950s and 1960s, large scale production of cotton and sugar and incipient industrialization stimulated within the elites the growth of a new "agro-industrialist" (p. 8) faction, a group generally more open to electorial democracy and market reforms than the old "agrarians" but still linked tightly to these by marriage and business. Faced with leftist uprisings in the 1970s and 1980s, some elements among the "agro-industrialists" reluctantly abandoned the old style repression still favored by the "agrarians," either to side with the revolution, as in Nicaragua before 1979, or to promote modest political and economic reforms meant to undercut the appeal of the insurgents, as in El Salvador after 1979. Leftist popular pressure split Central American elites, prompting some of the "agro-industrialists" into the role of Barrington Moore's bourgeoisie. In El Salvador, they accepted "representative but restricted and controlled" (p. 199) democracy, if not discussion of human rights or "structural reforms," while in Nicaragua, a "technical" (p. 274) faction of the elites was willing to work with the FSLN or the UNO, or, less openly, the Contras, to regain economic stability. At the same time, Costa Rica's social welfare system survived but came under increasing pressure from a new class of "mega-processors" (p. 267) linked to multinational capital.

Along with a tentative and partial embrace of democracy, many Central American elites also have enthusiastically adopted neo-liberal economics. But this newly-embraced "market utopianism" (p. 51), Prof. Paige argues, threatens the region's shaky stability. Neo-liberalism demands the dismantling of state institutions that have underwritten five decades of Costa Rican democracy, and in El Salvador and Nicaragua, it threatens even the very limited popular economic and political gains made during the 1980s. A resurgence of protests

from the poor could drive the "agro-industrialists" back into the arms of the "agrarians," and the still-active army, and revive blanket repression. By splitting the elites, leftist insurgency broke the traditional dominant alliance and opened the way for limited economic and political reform, but because these revolutions failed, fundamental class conflicts remain unresolved. The irony is that incomplete leftist uprisings produced limited bourgeoisie democracy and neo-liberal economics.

When they seek to explain their situation and the policies they have adopted, each of the "agro-industrial" elites of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica choose to emphasize a different aspect of liberal ideology. Salvadorians, for example, stress "progress" (p. 9), by which they mean economic growth free of government intervention. Nicaraguan "technicals" sought "liberty" from an FSLN command economy. And Costa Rican elites continue to advance their myth of "democracy" (p. 9) and Tico exceptionalism, even as neo-liberal economic policies undermine it. Each elite reinterprets national history so as to place itself at the center and to justify its past and present actions; this is its "narrative." To the extent that this narrative is at odds with historical or current reality, it is an "ideology," a vision of the past/present manipulated to serve a current socio-political or cultural purpose. Traditionally elites have repressed the resulting contradictions, whether in their minds or on the streets, but to the extent that by the 1980s, some were willing to attempt to reconcile in a positive way their imagined world with what was in fact going on outside, effective reform became possible.

Coffee and Power is smoothly written, if in places repetitive, and it is longer than it needs to be, but it does provide a very useful overview of the history of twentieth century Central America from the elite perspective. Particularly fascinating, and historians will wish that he had given more attention to the text of these, are Paige's very extensive interviews with elites done in the three countries during the 1980s. Clearly the author had unparalled access. Perhaps someone with comparable access to Guatemala's coffee elites could take up the "model" offered here and see how it applies or does not apply to the region's most important coffee republic. Above all, the book is strongly recommended as an antidote to excessive post-Cold War self congratulations and market worship.

But why does a 432 page book by Harvard University Press not have a simple bibliography?

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam

Citation: David M. McCreery. Review of Paige, Jeffery M., *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America.* H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2049

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.