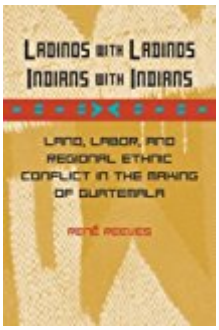
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



René Reeves. *Ladinos with Ladinos, Indians with Indians: Land, Labor, and Regional Ethnic Conflict in the Making of Guatemala.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006. 264 pp. $58.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-5213-8.

Reviewed by Rick McCallister

Published on H-LatAm (October, 2010)

Commissioned by Kenneth Kincaid (Purdue University North Central)

René Reeves's book is a contrarian study of the fall and rise of liberalism in nineteenth-century Guatemala. In this volume, Reeves demonstrates a competent and entertaining writing style that constantly engages the reader. He repeats his main themes and facts as leitmotifs to drill them into the reader. The book begins in media res with an exciting anecdote of the first harbingers of defeat for Guatemala's first liberal regime in 1837. He then fast forwards to the virtually unopposed liberal uprising of 1871.

Among his anecdotes, Reeves intersperses raw figures to show that the commonly accepted doxa in terms of the liberal-conservative dichotomy in nineteenth-century Guatemala is completely wrong. The traditional version of events is that the liberals were export oriented capitalists focused on coffee, while conservatives leaned toward an almost feudal self-sufficiency. Reeves shows that the coffee boom actually began under the conservatives. It is usually maintained that Mayan lands were inviolate under conservative rule, yet Reeves claims through anecdotes and examples that the alienation of Native American property actually began when Guatemala was a Spanish colony and continued throughout conservative rule.

After reading through the first three or four chapters, I began to wonder if Gabriel García Márquez's maxim on liberals and conservatives was true: that the only difference between the two parties was that liberals got up an hour earlier. We see conservatives aiding and abetting land theft, privatizing community lands, enforcing debt peonage, participating in alcohol rackets, calling up mandatory labor to build roads to benefit major landholders, creating public infrastructure, etc. All of this makes us wonder what precisely was the difference between the two parties, given that according to Reeves, poor and Native American Guatemalans did not seem to perceive major differences. Following Reeves's statistics, the answer seems to be that the principal differences were more quantitative than qualitative. The liberals rationalized coffee production, codified debt peonage, and had a solid ideological

stance in favor of privatizing all land. Another principal reason is that while the conservatives saw Native Americans as wards of the state, as childlike subhumans to be protected by the state, liberals saw them as lacking humanity, at best an obstacle to national progress.

So why did the first generation of liberals fail and the second generation succeed? According to Reeves, the principle difference was pragmatism. The 1830s liberals were hell-bent on implementing an ideological package at all costs and failed to consider the magnitude of public opposition against their plans. They merely saw all defiance as irrational obscurantism and fought till the bitter end.

When the conservative caudillo Rafael Carrera came into power after overthrowing Francisco Morazán's liberals, he paid lip service to Native American rights, but let entropy take its course. As a reputed illiterate, he had little to offer in terms of an ideological agenda. By the time the conservatives were thrown out of office, they have drifted into liberal territory and had completely lost their way in ideological terms. They practiced everything they excoriated the liberals for doing while setting up intrusive and corrupt monopolies in liquor that pointedly alienated the Mayans. This cost them Native American support. In the meantime, the Spanish-speaking Ladino population had doubled, offering a greatly increased population base for the liberal movement. Upon resuming power, the liberals oriented themselves toward piecemeal tactical goals.

Reeves could have presented the liberals in Gramsciam terms: in the 1830s, they were a revolutionary force with an agenda that promised progress for all. In other terms, they were an organic force. By the 1870s, however, they had become a traditional party that catered to the governing elite. Reeves could have spoken in Deleuzian or Virilian (i.e., Paul Virilio) terms of the conservatives' imbalance between ideology and praxis, a condition that leads to a nomadological overthrow of government. In 1871, the liberals were simply the better ideological fit in terms of prevailing praxis. In an anti-Marxist move, the Guatemelan elite ironically put the superstructure before the foundation. Reeves's work, however, almost completely lacks any trace of theory other than a Foucauldian penchant for entertaining anecdotes. He does refer to Carrera's overwhelming success as an example of Althusserian overdetermination (p. 176). He then refers to Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent's ***Everyday Forms of State Formation*** (1994), but his reading of this critical work presents it as secondhand Gramscian, i.e., the grounding in "hegemony." He bandies about the term "subaltern" without plugging it into its ideological context.

In sum, the book is very well researched, extremely well written in stylistic terms, even entertaining. A major annoyance and professional oversight, however, is the lack of a bibliography. It demonstrates that the author has mastered the material. Only the lack of a theoretical grounding prevents this book from rising to greatness. History is the result of a process of intellectual scrutiny rather than a mere presentation of the facts. The focus on a very small region of Guatemala while claiming to speak for the whole nation is at times disconcerting, but this is mitigated by the use of statistics for the whole nation. Given the dearth of material on this place and time, this book, despite its shortcomings, will be an essential part of any library of Central American studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam

Citation: Rick McCallister. Review of Reeves, René. *Ladinos with Ladinos, Indians with Indians: Land, Labor, and Regional Ethnic Conflict in the Making of Guatemala.* H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25167