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**Lowell Gudmundson, Hector Lindo-Fuentes.** *Central America, 1821-1871: Liberalism before Liberal Reform.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995. viii + 156 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-0765-3.

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**Shortening the Long Wait, or Tragedy and Irony in Nineteenth-Century Central America**

Lesley Byrd Simpson once wrote that "It is not easy to follow the thread of reason in the generation following the Independence of Mexico." The same may well be said of Central America. For many, Central America in the mid-nineteenth century is the "archtype of anarchy." Efforts to create a united and progressive isthmian nation collapsed by the late 1830s, to be followed by some thirty years of Conservative domination in which "progress" was halted and the unionist project discarded.

In a self-consciously revisionist work of synthesis and interpretation, Lowell Gudmundson and Hector Lindo-Fuentes attempt to make sense of these years of tumult. They challenge the notions of anarchy and Conservative stasis, while reexamining the beliefs and behavior of Central American Liberals. They argue for an understanding of the mid-century years that emphasizes continuity rather than departure, evolution over revolution. They insist that social and economic structural changes are more important than political maneuvering. And, rather than the "long wait" Tulio Halperin Donghi insists Latin America endured before realizing the promise of independence, in Central America the century's middle decades launched the beginnings of changes long associated with late-nineteenth-century Liberals.

The authors are well-known among Central Americanists for their previous works (Lindo-Fuentes, *Weak Foundations*; Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*, among others). In essence, this book is a concise distillation of their own and other scholars' recent work on nineteenth-century Central America.

In a brief introduction and two distinct but complementary essays totaling 128 pages (including notes) the authors aspire to "build a new framework of interpretation for mid-nineteenth-century Central America" (p. 1). Although one might question the "newness" of their argument, the authors succeed admirably in fashioning a compelling historical vision of Central America in the half-century following independence from Spain.

Following the jointly written introduction, Lindo-Fuentes explores "The Economy of Central America: From Bourbon Reforms to Liberal Reforms." He begins with a clear and insightful discussion of the late colonial economy. The late colonial indigo boom quickened the pace of production and commerce but affected only a small percentage of total trade and did not alter traditional land and labor arrangements. Traditionally, he believes, too much emphasis has been placed on land conflict and haciendas. Control of land was not the key to oligarchy. Nor were land problems a hindrance to economic growth: land was relatively abundant, whereas capital was limited. Commerce and credit played a much more crucial role than heretofore acknowledged and merit greater attention from scholars (before and after independence).

Independence disrupted the colonial economic network dominated by Guatemala City. It propelled the rise of foreign merchants and undermined isthmian economic integration. Despite the early political instability which hampered the investment climate, the nineteenth century saw a definitive shift to an export orientation (which the authors presumably consider a fundamental feature of liberalism). But, Lindo-Fuentes argues, the transition began earlier than late-nineteenth-century Liberals claimed (and historians long believed). Weak governments had few resources (and limited interest) in resisting the shift to an export orientation.

The "gold rush era" of the 1850s was most significant: it accelerated commercial traffic, lowered freight rates, brought infrastructural improvements (ports, roads and railroads), encouraged a shift to Pacific trade, and opened new commercial possibilities. In tracing the shift to an export orientation, Lindo-Fuentes discusses indigo, cochineal, and all-important coffee. (He also treats domestically oriented activities such as cattle, sugar, and mining.) Coffee was unique: it was much more demanding (especially in the need for long-term credit) and thus

stimulated efforts to build a stronger state. As Lindo-Fuentes suggests (following Robert G. Williams), coffee (rather than liberalism per se) is best associated with the state building typical of late century Liberalism.

The effect, here, is to place the coffee horse before the liberal cart. The diverse outcomes of the nearly universal transition had to do with timing, with the relative weight of the colonial heritage for each state, and with the prevailing commercial opportunities and demographic circumstances of the Central American states at the time the transition began. The colonial heritage (Indians or no Indians, the availability of land and labor) determined whether that transition would be disruptive and oppressive.

Lindo-Fuentes asserts convincingly that Central America's export expansion began in the 1850s rather than the 1870s. Still, although the expansion may have begun before the Liberal Reforms, Lindo-Fuentes' own figures demonstrate that the most dramatic expansion of coffee exports took place *after* the liberals took over, especially in Guatemala and El Salvador, and, arguably, even for Costa Rica. Surely there is a link between the scale and pace of coffee expansion and the transition to liberalism.

Central American Coffee Exports (in pesos) Guatemala El Salvador Costa Rica 1864 192,762 80,605 1,576,246 1867 415,878 275,220 2,155,000 1874 3,554,826 1,342,952 4,464,000

Source: Lindo-Fuentes, p. 47.

Ultimately, Lindo-Fuentes is dismissive of the importance of politics in effecting change. Lowell Gudmundson develops the theme of the limited importance of politics (or rather, the subordination of politics to social and economic change) in his essay "Society and Politics in Central America, 1821-1871."

Politics was most often a matter of intraclass conflict and only rarely involved interclass struggles. Gudmundson effectively highlights the limits of ideology; his most telling comment may be his assertion that "where material interests begin, ideologies end" (p. 102).

Still, Gudmundson derives great mileage from (and seems to have great fun) pointing out the contradictions of Central American Liberalism. His treatment, incidentally, bears comparison with Emilia Viotti da Costa's discussion of the Brazilian elite's adoption of a "liberalism" which countenanced slavery, monarchy and elitist rule in *The Brazilian Empire*.

Gudmundson characterizes the Liberals of Central America as elitist and racist. He scores them on their insensitivity to the masses, particularly the Indians. Perhaps anachronistically, he berates them for their insensitivity to women. And he criticizes their naivete with respect to foreigners and foreign models.

He deftly explores the crucial role of the church question (which the Liberals mishandled). He explains effectively why Liberal policies failed to attract commoner support; simply put, their policies on such matters as land, jury trials, marriage and divorce were not in the masses' best interests and the masses knew it. In one of his more arresting passages, Gudmundson points out the ineffectiveness of Liberal faith in science and progress in evading epidemics and the political fallout of the failure.

Unlike, say, E. Bradford Burns, Gudmundson does not romanticize the relationship between patriarchs and the folk. Rather, Liberals and Conservatives shared similar social origins and a common disdain for the masses (which the Liberals compounded with hypocrisy). He points out the irony that Conservatives were more effective in laying the groundwork for later changes than the early Liberals (and refused to undo earlier changes). Ironically (and tragically), once in power, Central American Liberals achieved the opposite of their historic ideals: instead of democracy and equality, they wrought dictatorship and "patriarchal authoritarianism."

Gudmundson does not always clearly separate Liberalism from Liberal politics (or the politics of self-proclaimed Liberals). Liberalism seems to have a shifting or at least elusive definition; is it no more than free-trade or export promotion? His argument would benefit from a more developed discussion of isthmian conservatism.

For example, in contrast to his empathetic view of the mass's revulsion at Liberal policies, Gudmundson criticizes Conservative Costa Rican president Juan Rafael Mora for not seeming to realize that he should have been a Liberal. But what is the basis of his (political) conservatism? The distinction between interests and ideology is key. Mora and other Costa Ricans were perhaps right to be wary: Guatemalan and Salvadoran Liberalism represented centralism, union, the expansion of U.S. influence (Walker!), efforts to restrict the role of the British (who bought most of their coffee), and an attack on "colonial institutions" (the Church and Indian communities) that had limited relevance for Costa Rica.

In their introduction, the authors announce that they set out to "show that…the Liberal reforms [of the 1870s and beyond] only formalized a situation long in the making." Thus, they "downgrade the significance of the reform movement of the 1870s as a turning point in the

economic, political, and social history of Central America" (p. 1).

This is probably overstated. Even if the Liberal regimes did not create the conditions that brought them to power in the first place (in effect giving birth to themselves), they *consolidated* and *accelerated* extraordinarily important changes, which, according to scholars like Robert G. Williams and David McCreery in their recent studies, were revolutionary. Thus, although Gudmundson and Lindo-Fuentes are right to push back the origins of the "Liberal" reforms and to place economic causes before poltical effects, we should not too hastily disregard or unjustifiably minimize the significance of the Liberal Revolutions of the 1870s. They did more than formalize the status quo. They came about because conservative regimes were unable or unwilling to take the steps necessary to secure and sustain the interests of (especially coffee) exporters.

At first glance, Gudmundson's treatment of Central American society appears almost as an afterthought. It occupies a mere fifteen pages at the very end of the book. Yet, it is probably the most provocative part of the book, and perhaps the little tome's most valuable contribution. It features an especially impressive discussion of race and ethnicity. Liberals little understood the nature of the society they sought to alter. And race (ladino, mulatto, Indian) was less a matter of biology and culture than politics and socio-economic behavior.

One of Gudmundson's more fascinating findings is that export expansion led to a "simplification" of the social order. It brought a "ruralization" of society with the expansion of coffee and the weakening and/or destruction of the isthmian artisanal sector. Thus, while the economy (and perhaps the polity) became more complex, society itself was simplified.

A synthetic general conclusion would have been helpful. The discussion of social change could have been expanded and more closely integrated into the discussion of economic and political change.

As stated, the authors seek to offer a new framework for nineteenth-century Central America. Yet, the novelty of their approach may be questioned. To their credit, the authors acknowledge on page one that "Those who have kept abreast of th[e] growing literature on nineteenth-century Central America may not be surprised with the interpretive thrust here." Thus, it is not exactly clear who their historiographical antagonists might be, or how worthy of engaging in debate. William J. Griffith, for example, assaulted Liberal historiographical hegemony as early as 1960. I wonder who still adheres seriously to the views of Montufar, Bancroft, and Salazar?

In all fairness, perhaps, in Central America itself, where, in places like Guatemala City one inevitably spends a great deal of time cruising Reform Avenue, circling the Reform Tower, and evading statues of the Great Reformer, such an argument may have greater need of repetition. And, if there are still old-fashioned true believers out there, they will be hard-pressed to answer the challenge raised by these essays.

In sum, Gudmundson and Lindo-Fuentes offer a valuable work of synthesis and interpretation. They provide a valuable summing up, in a clear and concise fashion, of the "state of the art" in contemporary research on mid-nineteenth-century Central America. *Central America, 1821-1871* is a welcome addition to the literature, strongly recommended for specialists in nineteenth-century Latin America, and essential reading for students of Central American history.

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