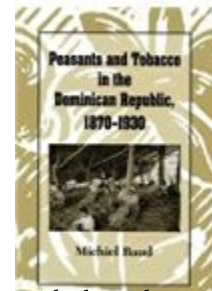


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michiel Baud. *Peasants and Tobacco in the Dominican Republic, 1870-1930*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. x + 326 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-891-6.

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Published on H-LatAm (August, 1996)



This book centers around the history of a Dominican tobacco-growing community, and its interaction with the national and international market. Although the main focus is on Villa Gonzales, a village formed by the growth of the tobacco market in the northern Dominican Republic, Michiel Baud deals with the Dominican tobacco peasantry in general and their struggle for economic independence. He also touches many aspects dealing with Dominican history before and after the period of his study (1870-1930) that could enlighten the understanding of the subject. To make his work even more comprehensive, the author compares and studies previous works on peasantry and adopts what could be valuable for the Dominican experience. Yet, what sets this work apart is the harmonious blending of field history with archival research.

A combination of exhaustive Dominican economic history and detailed knowledge of the character of the Dominican peasantry makes this book a milestone in the history of Latin American peasantries. The author presents the history of Villa Gonzales in detail. He describes the lifestyle, customs, and quagmires of the peasants with accuracy. Yet, he is also able to portray the plights of this community within the broader context of national and international arenas.

The reader will find that the comparative dialogue between the history of the Dominican peasants and other peasants abroad helps the student discover the uniqueness of the Dominican experience. Rarely does oral history take prominence; rather, it complements and enhances the understanding by providing concrete examples of what otherwise would have been a theoretical explication. Baud freely uses Spanish and colloquial phrases to give the reader a complete picture of the scene and a glimpse into the peasant's life. Although the book

covers a wide range of topics dealing with this tobacco-growing peasantry, the thrust of this work is the peasants' economic independence and their influence on the local and national market.

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Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Spanish Creoles controlled the tobacco production that was starting to flourish in the fertile north-central valley of the Dominican Republic. From the beginning, tobacco proved to be a suitable cash crop for these poor agrarians who were constantly struggling against a paucity of hard

currency. Most of the tobacco plantations were in the Cibao region. After years of successful tobacco planting, the provinces of Santiago and La Vega became symbols of prosperity. Even though the influence and power of the merchants and landowners was increasing, the cultivation of tobacco remained almost exclusively the field of a legion of families, who produced mounting loads of this crop. The case of tobacco production in the Dominican Republic demonstrated that minor-degree peasant agriculture could lead to increasing production for the export market. Because of their subsistence lifestyle, the tobacco producers were considered by many to be hardworking, honest, and thrifty citizens. According to some then-contemporary observers, this self-dependent lifestyle would lead the nation to a more democratic and egalitarian society.

Peasants and Tobacco

Too often Caribbean peasant groups have been disregarded or misinterpreted by scholars in the past. However, in order to conduct a significant study of the tobacco peasantry in the Dominican Republic, scholars should take the peasant society itself as a point of departure. It becomes important to understand the relation between the peasant farmers and the tobacco market, and to inquire about the social relationship of the peasant class and the governing class. The origin of the tobacco peasantry resides in the fact that the ready availability of land warranted their political and financial independence. Moreover, the nature of the tobacco cultivation permitted the peasant to look for supplementary crops and wages, promoting in this way a variety of fruitage and migratory labor. In the Cibao peasant society, the tobacco leaves were the basis for the majority of commercial activities. Credit, instead of hard currency, was what most producers were able to obtain for their crops. Sometimes what the tobacco trader sought met with the peasant producer's interest. The peasant needed the trader to sell his product, and the trader depended on the peasant and his product. However, too often the peasant experienced injustice in the exchange with local monopolies.

The history of the tobacco peasantry in Villa Gonzales provides us with a case study on the evolution of the peasant society. Peasant autonomy, originally due to the abundance of land, was limited by the immersion of the local market in the international arena. Even after the railroad and ambitious entrepreneurs acquired large tracts of land, this emerging landowning elite did not curtail the lifestyle of the peasantry. Some amount of autonomy was still characteristic to the tobacco peasants. Re-

lations and distance between the elite and the peasantry were carefully guarded and respected by both sides. It was in this context that "compadrazo" and other systems of loyalty acquired a new and consequential meaning. These strong paternalistic relations provided the peasantry with a buffer of protection against external threats, while securing local political dominance and a labor force for the elite.

Time favored the market over the peasant subsistence life style. Wage labor increased as the interdependent form of labor help decreased. Easy access to free land also declined, knocking down the foundation of peasant agriculture. Not surprisingly, the peasant's way of life became increasingly difficult and subservient to the market economy.

Outsiders and the Peasant Economy

The Cibao merchants represented a formidable economic and political force in the area. They drew their economic power mostly from their dependency on the international market, particularly from the German traders. With the cash or credit they received from the Europeans, the Cibao merchants were able to purchase tobacco from the peasants and consumer goods from the Europeans themselves. This condition was very financially unstable for the merchant class, and their insecurity worsened with several commercial crises in the Cibao region by the end of the nineteenth century.

The twentieth century ameliorated the financial condition of the Cibao merchants. Other crops besides tobacco brought diversity to the region; the less competitive merchants vanished, while others expanded into strong commercial establishments. The new century also brought an end to the German monopoly on the tobacco market. The new establishment of foreign firms in the Cibao area developed a healthy competition and a nationalistic spirit.

The Cibao elite disliked state intervention in local matters. The chauvinistic and autonomous Cibao elite proved a strong barricade to the national government. Fiercely they guarded their control and influence in local matters. However, they had to compete with the southern sugar business, share their hegemony with foreign firms, and also deal with a hostile national government. This did not leave enough room for the regional elite to completely control the peasants and their way of life. That is why small-scale production continued dominating the commercial practices in the Cibao region.

During the late nineteenth century, the large-scale sugar plantations represented the economic model that the national government wanted to implement throughout the entire country. Even though this ideology of progress continued to pervade most of the political circles, little by little peasants started being vindicated. The idea that it was necessary to include the rural population in any type of modernization started to sink into the minds of many. Ramon Caceres and Horacio Vasquez displayed concern to include the peasants into plans for progress by legislative measures that stimulated agrarian production and intended to modernize the rural economy. Although in the long run it helped to incorporate the rural society into the market economy, most of the effort by the national government had little immediate impact on rural society.

The Dominican government wanted to transform rural society, but found itself unable to create a significant change. This inability came as a result of its insolvency and defective organization. To make things worse for the state, the regional elite effectively blocked most of the state interventions. Before the totalitarian government of Trujillo, the Dominican state had to accommodate itself to the local elite. Only gradually was the state able to circumvent the blocking elite and reach the peasants, and only to a small degree.

To achieve control of the rural society the state tried educating the peasants with technological instruction and increasing political control by restricting autonomy and legal space allocated to the peasant producers. From the beginning, the national government had to deal with a serious lack of money that hindered most of its projects. There was an inconsistency between the centralist state program and the weakness of the national government. Naturally the government was unable to enforce many of its laws. Another factor contributing to the state inefficacy was the tendency to ignore the peasant mentality. Only when a program took into consideration the logic and mentality of peasant production was the program successful.

Conclusion:

In the midst of discussions about the role of peasants in a capitalistic economy, the case of the tobacco growers in the Cibao region provides fresh perspectives to Latin American historiography. For instance, we learn from this case that through subsistence agriculture, the Cibao peasants were able to influence the development of rural society, despite the local elite's and state's pressure.

Through this study, we also see that the relationship between peasantries and capitalistic markets is active and complex. The peasants who were successful in withstanding state or market pressure were the ones who successfully held onto their land. This economic autonomy was the key to their success within the subsistence economy. It is important to mention that the Cibao peasantry was a socially and politically weak class. Their degree of autonomy was guaranteed only if they could play different elite factions against each other. Therefore, we can say that to some degree elite groups were allies, as well as potential oppressors, for the peasantry. After the 1920s, a more powerful and efficient national government became a more strengthened force in rural society. Yet, even with the state presence, the peasants tried to counteract the trend toward land concentration.

If we observe today's Cibao tobacco-growing peasants, we can mistakenly conclude that their condition has been unchanged since the turn of the century. The poverty and the exploitation they currently experience symbolizes backwardness and oppression, which speak of a transformation in their lifestyle and condition. This transformation came about at the hand of the world economy and Leonidas Trujillo.

Trying to increase production to offset the decline in world prices for domestic products, Trujillo successfully brought the agricultural sector under government control. His endeavors eliminated peasant autonomy. However, the decline of the peasants' autonomy started during the 1920s. Access to land, slowly but steadily, became more restricted and peasants had to pay for its use. Unfortunately, the failure of different agrarian programs worsened the peasants' chances to gain the practical tools for economic success.

Analysis

Michiel Baud is a meticulous researcher and professor of Latin American history at the University of Leiden in Holland. Probably the most important contribution of his book to Latin American historiography is his attempt to place the Cibao peasantry into an active and influential position in the history of the Dominican economy. Successfully Baud explains that this small-scale agriculture was able to provide a significant production toward the export market, helping in this way to increase the national exporting strength. In this way he dispels the notion of an always ineffectual peasantry.

This book is a result of serious scientific research and brings with it a complete coverage of the subject. The

works consulted represent all the available sources of support. However, probably as a result of the subject's nature and the scholarly discourse, this book is not easy to read. If the book sometimes looks repetitive, it is because its organization is planned to avoid divergence. Whatever its limitations, this book is a big step toward the understanding of Latin American peasantries, their logic, their nature, and their accomplishments. It is dif-

ficult to conceive that there will be any new research on this topic that does not take Baud's work into consideration.

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Citation: Dennis R. Hidalgo. Review of Baud, Michiel, *Peasants and Tobacco in the Dominican Republic, 1870-1930*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. August, 1996.

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