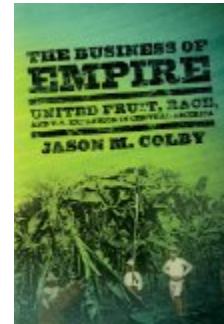


Jason M. Colby. *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. xi + 274 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4915-4.

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## Corporate Colonialism: Race, Labor, and Empire in Central America and the Caribbean

In recent years, an impressive amount of literature has appeared addressing the development and impact of foreign produce companies in Latin America, with particular focus on banana companies, chief among these the United Fruit Company. These monographs and anthologies—dealing with banana economies, politics, and cultures—have called scholarly attention to the entanglements between corporations and U.S. imperialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, underscoring connections between powerful companies, like United Fruit, and the political tenor of U.S. foreign policy in Latin American countries where those companies operated.[1] Jason M. Colby’s monograph takes this connection between U.S. state and corporate actions further. He contends that state and corporate spheres of activity in Latin America not only were connected, but also were mutually constitutive, with what he describes as “corporate colonialism” shaping the realm of possibility for U.S. informal empire in the region. As Colby writes, “it was far more common for the peoples of Central America and the broader Caribbean to encounter U.S. power and labor practices through interactions with private enterprise than with the American state” (p. 4).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Colby focuses on the United Fruit Company as his main corporate case study, and he chooses Costa Rica and Guatemala as his primary national case studies, though he also sets these cases in Central American and Caribbean context. Colby argues, in brief, that the United Fruit Company imported labor con-

trol strategies learned in North America—he highlights labor segmentation or division between racial groups of workers—and adapted them to Central American and Caribbean circumstances in order to “play one race against the other” (p. 6). In Costa Rica and Guatemala, United Fruit hired West Indian laborers, whose racial differences from Hispanic workers undermined united labor organizing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but which also contributed by the 1920s to a wave of Hispanic nationalism redolent with anti-black xenophobia and anti-imperialist sentiment. Ironically, Colby argues, United Fruit was forced to come to terms by the mid-twentieth century with the same anti-black racism and Hispanic nationalism that it had helped to create; fears that had once strengthened its empire now undermined its power as Central American nations associated United Fruit with black immigration and resisted the company’s attempts to gain more land and control.

The monograph is divided into three sections. Part 1, “Foundations of Empire,” explores the origins of U.S. informal empire in the Caribbean and Central America, and the rise of the United Fruit Company, which does not actually appear until the end of chapter 2. Part 2, “Race and Labor,” examines the operation of United Fruit’s labor segmentation system and the relationship between labor and race in the banana enclaves, in the minds of U.S. United Fruit officials, and for people in Central America and the Caribbean who encountered U.S. systems of labor control. Notably, part 2 also introduces the reader

to Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which figure prominently in Colby's analysis. In part 3, "Imperial Transitions," Colby focuses on Hispanic nationalism and challenges to United Fruit's dominance in the region beginning in the 1920s. Part 3 also discusses the adoption—by the U.S. state and by United Fruit—of Good Neighbor Policy initiatives in Latin America, and attempts by both to rehabilitate their images as imperialist behemoths, instead coding themselves as cooperative agents of progress. Colby's organizational structure in this book effectively maintains a clear sense of his narrative and argument, which is notable given the broad geography and time span covered here.

Colby's sources are truly impressive. First, he has discovered a trove of company records, which are, as he points out, truly priceless in light of United Fruit's destruction of the vast majority of its corporate archives. Even more important, his analysis of these documents brings to light provocative and thoughtful new ideas about how United Fruit—a company that historians have been studying for many years, and in many ways—affected Latin American societies on the ground, and how company officials thought about their actions in their own cultural and political contexts. Second, Colby's analysis of other sources, from travel narratives to corporate annual statements to newspaper editorials, is often not only convincing but also arresting to the eye. (To give a single example I underlined when reading this book, Colby quotes the president of United Fruit saying in a 1932 speech: "I don't know about spiritual values in countries that are ruled by dictators, but I do know that they are always run efficiently. In fact, I wouldn't mind seeing dictators in Massachusetts right now—and in Washington as well. At least things would be run on an efficient basis" [p. 194].) Instructors of classes on empire, U.S.-Latin American relations, labor, and race will find ample fodder for lectures, document workshops, and other classroom activities in these pages. However, the book might be best suited as a reading for graduate stu-

dents; it demands a fair amount of background knowledge on a wide range of history (both chronologically and geographically), which undergraduate students are unlikely to have.

My primary critique relates to the development of Colby's central case studies. Colby's analytical scope spans the entire Central American isthmus, as well as the Caribbean basin. He considers Panama, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, El Salvador, and other countries, some in considerable detail, in addition to his main case studies of Costa Rica and Guatemala. While all this contextual information sets his two main cases in undeniably deep and thorough context, the balance here tips too far toward context and away from developing truly detailed—and therefore compelling—case studies for Costa Rica and Guatemala to be identified as the main focus of this study. Colby has interesting and provocative things to say about these two countries, which are convincing, but they get lost in the forest. This criticism aside, Colby's monograph is both thought provoking and well written, and will find appreciative audiences among historians interested in U.S.-Latin American relations, Latin American history, empire, race, and labor.

#### Note

[1]. For example, see Darío A. Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic: Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Lester D. Langley and Thomas Schoonover, *The Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); and Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg, eds. *Banana Wars: Power, Production and History in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

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