

Review Essay

Social Origins of Central American Democracy

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Paige, Jeffery M. *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Appendixes, index, 432 pp.; hardcover \$45, paperback \$18.95.

Yashar, Deborah J. *Demanding Democracy: Reform and Reaction in Costa Rica and Guatemala, 1870s–1950s*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. Maps, figures, tables, acronyms, notes, bibliography, index, 319 pp.; hardcover \$49.50, paperback \$18.95.

It has been more than three decades since the publication of Barrington Moore's pathbreaking study, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966). As important as the empirical argument this volume set forth was the type of explanation it emphasized. It explained regime outcomes in terms of the long-term consequences of different patterns of (rural) socioeconomic modernization and political conflict. This society-centered mode of explanation subsequently assumed prominence in a broad range of important studies (for example, Lipset and Rokkan 1967; O'Donnell 1973; Paige 1975). Beginning with transition volumes such as O'Donnell et al. 1986, however, the locus of intellectual attention shifted away from the underlying "social requisites" of democratic politics. Instead, scholars attempted to outline the micropolitical struggles and institutional arrangements that facilitated democratization. If the earlier wave of scholarship was criticized for its overly deterministic, structural character, this more recent wave placed strong emphasis on the agency of individual political actors (for example, Przeworski 1991; for a discussion of such approaches, see Collier and Norden 1992).

More recently, attention has shifted again, to the problems of consolidating democratic institutions (see, for example, Linz and Stepan 1996; Domínguez and Lowenthal 1996; Mainwaring and Scully 1995). Linked to the concern with democratic consolidation has been a renewed interest in the historically successful cases of democratization (for example, Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Putnam 1993; Luebbert 1987). This trend marks a partial return to society-centered explanations.

It is, broadly speaking, in this "societal" mode of explanation that both of the works under consideration here are situated. Paige's book is an ambitious, three-country study, accounting for elite ideology and regime outcomes at two critical moments in El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. Yashar focuses on Costa Rica and Guatemala, emphasizing the political dynamics of regime formation in the postwar reform periods and the ensuing consolidation of democracy and military authoritarianism, respectively. While the two authors present quite different theories, they both emphasize underlying political and socioeconomic variables in the historical development of Central American politics. These truly are accounts of the "social origins" of Central American regimes, and as such they are a welcome complement to analyses of democratization that have focused on the negotiation of pacts or the design of institutions.

POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN REGIME FORMATION

Both these works operate within a "critical junctures" framework (see Collier and Collier 1991, chap. 1). They locate the origins of Central American regimes in the resolution of agrarian political conflicts at key historical moments. (By comparison, Mahoney 1997 locates the critical juncture in an earlier period.) Both see these outcomes as rooted in the dynamics of popular sector and middle-class mobilization from below and elite unity or division in response.

Paige's is the broader of the two works. Paige considers the origins of elite ideology and national politics at two separate but interconnected junctures. The first is the depression crisis of the 1930s and 1940s, when military authoritarianism became established in El Salvador, personalistic dictatorship in Nicaragua, and something akin to social democracy in Costa Rica. The second is the crisis of the 1980s, when a new upsurge of popular mobilization culminated in civil war in El Salvador, revolution in Nicaragua, and democratic continuity in Costa Rica. Paige also considers the resolution of the 1980s crisis, which in all three of the cases has led to the establishment of democratic politics and a neoliberal ideology among coffee elites.

Paige starts with the class dynamics of Central American coffee production. His focus, however, is not so much on the contradictions between classes as on the tensions between two fractions of the coffee elite: the landed, agrarian group and the agroindustrial, processing sector (pp. 54–56). The political and economic positions of these two fractions and their relationship to mobilized challenges from below become essential parts of the explanation of regime outcomes.

The agrarian fraction of the coffee elite is for Paige almost inevitably associated with authoritarian politics. Borrowing from his earlier work (1975), he argues that because its economic survival hinges on the effective

control over land and a large, low-wage labor force, the agrarian sector cannot accommodate material demands from below. The agroindustrial fraction, by contrast, is more politically ambiguous, because processing and export do not require large labor forces and are perfectly amenable to capitalization. (Thus class collaboration can be paid for out of the gains from rising productivity.) Therefore, when agrarians are dominant or in stable alliance with agroindustrial elites, politics is likely to remain closed, and demands from below may result in savage repression (p. 88). Alternatively, when the agroindustrialists predominate, democratic outcomes are possible but not inevitable.

This optic helps Paige trace the political dynamics of his three cases after the depression crisis. In El Salvador, agrarians were the dominant players in an undivided upper-class coalition that faced a radical challenge from below in 1932. (That challenge itself is partly explained by the agrarians' previous expropriation of peasant land, pp. 105–6). Unified Salvadoran elite fractions backed a military authoritarian response that brutally but effectively repressed the revolt and lasted until the 1980s. In Costa Rica, by contrast, the agroindustrial fraction was the dominant player, and the challenge from below was dramatically less radical (resulting from a conflict between processors and suppliers, not between landowners and semiservile laborers, pp. 127–29). The key factor in the explanation of Costa Rican democracy, then, is the absence of a powerful agrarian fraction of the coffee oligarchy (p. 87).

The Nicaraguan case is more complicated. The imposition of the Somoza dictatorship came as a result of U.S. intervention and less as a product of the class dynamics of the coffee economy, which Paige considers to have had "no developed classes" (pp. 89–90). Nevertheless, the agrarian elite's political support was crucial to the survival of both the Somoza and Sandinista governments.

These conditions lasted until the 1980s, when the expansion of new crops and the changing dynamics in the world coffee economy secured the agroindustrial elites as the dominant members of the oligarchy in all the Central American cases save Guatemala (pp. 93–94). Linked to this change was a simultaneous expansion of the marginal or underemployed (semiproletarian) rural labor force. When another wave of challenges from below threatened, this new social organization of production divided the agrarian and agroindustrial elites and opened the path to a democratic but neoliberal national political outcome (p. 95).

Paige's chapters 7 through 9 document the ideological divisions in the coffee oligarchy after the onset of the 1980s crisis. In El Salvador, the growing independence of agroindustrial elites, who began to split from their agrarian allies after it became clear that the civil war was unwinnable, made an eventual democratic accommodation possible. In Costa Rica, an elite ideology that supported democracy and welfare statism accounts for

the absence of an insurrectionary response to the severe economic downturn of the 1980s (a result of the debt crisis and a collapse in coffee prices). In Nicaragua, much of the agroindustrial fraction of the coffee elite initially supported the Sandinista revolution, in hopes that it would complete the liberal revolution long delayed by the Somoza dynasty. But economic calamity, mismanagement, and the ambiguity of Sandinista support for a mixed economy eventually drove this elite to support the Contra insurgency. This shift had ideological links; the agroindustrial elite had long sought entrepreneurial freedom, something it was denied under the Somoza dictatorship and the Sandinistas' socialism. By the end of the 1980s, the agroindustrialists, too, had settled for the marriage of political democracy and neoliberal economics.

This brings us to the essence of Paige's theory. In the underdeveloped and principally agricultural form of capitalism that has emerged in Central America, the central issue in terms of regime dynamics has been the division between agrarian and agroindustrial fractions of the rural elite. Only where the alliance between these two fractions could be severed has the establishment of representative democracy been possible (p. 320). But this process has been neither simple nor automatic. It required the intervention of armed revolutionaries to divide the coffee elites and forge a compromise around representative institutions (p. 329). Unlike the other accounts, moreover (such as Moore 1966; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992), the principal agents here were agroindustrial elites, not industrial capitalists, and they were challenged not by unionized workers but by rural, semiproletarian guerrillas. Thus democracy in Central America can be seen as a consequence of ultimately unsuccessful attempts at social transformation from below—under Calderón in Costa Rica, under the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, by the FMLN in El Salvador (p. 332).

The strength of this analysis—the account of regime dynamics based largely on underlying social and economic processes—is also its greatest weakness. Questions arise in the author's discussion of Guatemala—a case not central to the analysis. This is the only case of continued dominance by the agrarian fraction of the coffee elite in the 1980s. By contrast, in El Salvador the insurrection of the 1980s divided the oligarchy and led the agroindustrial fraction to compromise with rebel forces. Left unanswered is the question of why a sustained effort at socialist revolution from below did not divide the Guatemalan elite. If the presence of sustained rebellion is theoretically sufficient to drive the split (which appears to be the implication from the El Salvador chapters), then Guatemala is a problematic case. If, on the other hand, the strength of the rebellion from below is an important determinant, then more analytical focus needs to be placed on the lower classes and their internal dynamics of mobilization.

If Guatemala cries out for inclusion in the analysis, Nicaragua fits somewhat uncomfortably into Paige's framework. Here, U.S. intervention

seems to have overshadowed the effects of the causal variables Paige identifies in the other cases. Both the polyclass nationalism of Sandino and the personalistic dictatorship of Somoza were reactions to or results of the U.S. presence. On the other hand, the coffee oligarchy never consolidated power, and rural class dynamics never determined outcomes as strongly as they did in the other cases (p. 89). While the discussion of Nicaragua is compelling, the case seems different enough to provide only a weak test of the author's central hypotheses.

On balance, however, this book accomplishes a vast portion of its ambitious agenda. It represents a substantial theoretical advance in and empirical refinement of Moore's thesis, especially with respect to the role of capitalists in democratization. It refocuses scholars' energies on the process of agricultural modernization and its attendant class dynamics but still takes seriously the divisions within social classes and the role of ideas. Meanwhile, those aspects on which the analysis is less focused—especially the social-coalitional dynamics of reformist moments and the theoretical analysis of mobilization from below—are precisely where Yashar makes her strong contribution.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOUNDING MOMENTS

Yashar's analysis centers on the creation of Guatemalan military authoritarianism in 1954 and Costa Rican democracy in 1948. It takes as a crucial starting point the ultimately unstable reform periods that preceded these outcomes (1945–54 and 1942–48, respectively). The analysis provides a political explanation of both the emergence of these two periods and their regime-founding consequences. It highlights how, at key points, political struggles—operating at a level between structural determinism and individual agency—can reconfigure power in lasting ways. Thus this explanation problematizes precisely those issues that Paige leaves least explored.

Yashar tackles two questions: when is the opening of a regime-changing reform period possible, and what will its regime consequences be in the long run—authoritarianism or democracy? Like Paige, Yashar traces the parameters of coalition politics to the legacies of the late-nineteenth-century liberal reform periods that established agroexport economies and national states throughout Central America. Also like Paige, she identifies the control of land as characteristic of the Guatemalan but not the Costa Rican oligarchy; and she argues that as a consequence, the prereform Guatemalan state was substantially more repressive than that of Costa Rica, though both were authoritarian. The difference she links to the development of civil society; in Guatemala, civil society was underdeveloped among both elites and popular sector actors because of the presence of a large, coercive state (pp. 32–35).

Yashar identifies the Great Depression and state responses to it as the exogenous shock that launched the later reform periods (p. 66). In the wake of the depression and Allied victory in World War II, popular pressure and elite division opened the doors to social reform. Both Paige and Yashar see elite division as a crucial element of the story of regime transformation, but Yashar also explicitly considers the intracoalitional politics and policy choices of the reformists themselves. Here is where her analysis becomes a more directly political story than Paige's, one in which the structure of preexisting institutions, the political balance of power within the reform coalition, and the level of development of civil society start to shape very different long-term outcomes (Yashar, pp. 70–72).

In Costa Rica, Rafael Calderón came to power in 1940 through the traditional, oligarchy-dominated electoral institutions that had long characterized politics. But as the elite divided over the allocation of power in the legislature, anti-Axis politics, and social welfare reform proposals, Calderón turned to newly mobilized popular sector actors to deepen his political support: an odd alliance of the Catholic Church and the Communist Party (pp. 73–83). Social reforms were instituted, but through a reform coalition dominated by moderate forces (even the local Communist Party was almost social-democratic in character). Although power was substantially redistributed, Calderón was careful never to attack property rights or rural class relations (p. 115).

An armed insurrection over a contested electoral result in 1948 eventually led to the ouster of the reform coalition, but it was replaced by a multiclass opposition alliance with reformist tendencies and strong political ties to popular sector actors. Because the counterreform coalition had strong ties to society and was institutionally organized in political parties, democracy persisted (p. 168). Indeed, ironically, democracy and social reform survived despite the violent overthrow of the original coalition.

In Guatemala, the authoritarianism of Jorge Ubico was overthrown in a coup in 1944. But unlike Costa Rica, the reformist alliance that took power became progressively more radical. By the regime of Jacobo Arbenz (1951–54), it relied heavily on popular organizations that were making increasingly radical redistributive demands (pp. 117–37). As reforms were extended to include the redistribution of rural property, elites objected vehemently, and the historically underdeveloped character of Guatemalan civil society became a decisive factor. When, as Yashar puts it, counterreform forces could not construct a “viable political party able to challenge these redistributive reforms and mobilization, the opposition turned to arms” (p. 164). The result was an oligarchic-military alliance that is all too familiar.

In explaining the stability of these regimes, Yashar focuses squarely on the establishment of social control in the countryside. The political

outcomes constructed during reform episodes will last, she argues, only if three conditions are met: the state establishes autonomy from traditional elites while giving them a stake in the regime; control over the rural poor is effectively implemented either through electoral inclusion or repression; and the state develops the organizational capacity to govern either via a political party or through the strengthening of the state bureaucracy (p. 215). Therefore we learn that Costa Rican democracy is stable partly because of the effective control of the National Liberation Party (PLN) in the countryside, through its delivery of subsidy and social services (p. 219–21). In Guatemala, traditional elites unable to construct a viable political party relied on the military to govern the countryside (p. 223). This, however, supported the continued hegemony of the military and the elites' dependence on it (p. 227).

These are undoubtedly accurate descriptions of postreform politics in Guatemala and Costa Rica, but what remains unanswered is why. Why did Costa Rican elites choose to operate in the democratic political arena? Did Guatemalan elites rely on the military because they could not develop an important political base in open politics, or did military repression preclude their need to develop such a base?

Here is where Paige's focus on elite ideology helps fill in some of the gaps. He explains the emergence of a democratic and social reformist elite ideology in Costa Rica in terms of the resolution of the crisis of the depression (chapter 4). This orientation is rooted in, but not derived from, the conditions of material life. The subsequent normative commitment of elites was crucial to Costa Rican democracy's consolidation and survival through the trials of the 1980s. Paige shows how this elite democratic "narrative" is independent from material interests by pointing out that in the 1980s, President Oscar Arias, with the elite's support, jeopardized trade and aid relations with the United States to promote a peace settlement in Central America (p. 357). Similarly, the savage response of the El Salvadoran elite to the rebellion of the 1980s can be understood only in terms of the paranoid anticommunism that emerged as a result of the unrest of 1932 (chapter 3). Only when the agroindustrial fraction of the coffee elite began an ideological transformation that questioned some of the authoritarian practices prevalent since the 1930s was progress toward democracy and a negotiated peace possible (pp. 344–48).

Thus, for Paige, the consolidation of Central American authoritarianism and democracy depends partly on how ideology structures elite political behavior. His empirically grounded account of the normative commitments of elites complements Yashar's focus on the politics of the reform period. It answers the "why" question left less explored in her analysis, and it adds an ideational component to the account of regime endurance.

SYNTHESIS

While both these works provide excellent treatments of important issues, the impact of both taken together is, in an odd way, greater than the sum of their separate contributions. The strengths of one play to the weaknesses of the other, and vice versa. From Paige, as always, we get a sense of the implications of different patterns of socioeconomic organization and a detailed treatment of class structures and dynamics. This impressive political economy is complemented by an account of class ideology based on primary sources that not only reflects a remarkable data collection effort, but allows a rare and serious empirical treatment of the impact of ideas on historical regime outcomes. Paige, however, treats in a much more derivative fashion the political moments that launch democratic transitions and the institutionally constrained coalitional struggles that shape regime foundation.

Yashar, by contrast, examines in detail the political coalitions and coalition dynamics that can open and consolidate democratic (or authoritarian) regimes. She weaves together the depth and character of rural organization, the weight of moderates and radicals in the reform coalition, and the channeling effects of preexisting political institutions (or their absence) into a powerful explanation of regime outcomes. Less developed in her analysis are the ideational consequences of elite divisions and the socioeconomic underpinnings of the intra-elite constellations of power (these receive a somewhat more exogenous treatment). These are, of course, precisely Paige's strengths.

These works also make a pair of theoretical and methodological contributions. First, they highlight just how far society-oriented explanations of political outcomes can advance. Such approaches, when contrasted with much more proximate micropolitical explanations, always run the risk of reductionism. Adeptly handled, however, they can produce compelling explanations, more amenable to generalization and refinement in other cases. The "critical junctures" approach utilized by both scholars, moreover, is a welcome effort to resolve problems of structure versus agency. By focusing on the construction of regime outcomes in crucial "defining" moments (and it is instructive that both identify the same defining moments), they suggest a type of causal model more consonant with the punctuated equilibria that seem to characterize real-world political outcomes.

Finally, these works shift the intellectual focus of democratic consolidation away from questions of institutional design. Instead, they highlight problems of inequalities of wealth and power in the survival of democratic institutions. Paige, indeed, leaves us with the counterintuitive (and potentially depressing) conclusion that the recent democratic transitions in other parts of Latin America effected through political pacts that

maintained the key economic and social institutions of the ancien régime may be unstable. In contemporary Central America, historically the strongest bastion of Latin American authoritarianism, insurgents recently have forced revolutionary breaks with the past and elites have made real social accommodations. For precisely this reason, democracy here may be most stable (Paige, p. 336). Similarly, Yashar concludes that without the existence of powerful popular organizations, elite division, the political incorporation of the peasantry, and the redistribution of elite property—certainly revolutionary breaks with the past in the Central American context—democracy probably will not emerge or endure (p. 4). This joint finding is important both to scholars of Latin American democratization and to the Latin American democracies themselves.

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