

Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua. By *Elizabeth Dore*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006. xii + 252 pp. Photographs, maps, tables, glossary, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$74.95; paper, \$21.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-822-33686-3; paper, 0-822-33674-X.

Reviewed by Ralph Lee Woodward Jr.

During the mid- to late-nineteenth century, coffee exports came to dominate the Central American economies, especially in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and El Salvador, but also in Nicaragua. Although coffee cultivation began under the stimulus of Conservative Party governments, it took off under Liberal Party rule, moving the region more fully into the international trading economy. Some historians, therefore, have associated the coffee boom with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, or, more specifically, with the changeover from subsistence to plantation labor patterns. In *Myths of Modernity*, Elizabeth Dore, reader in Latin American history at the University of Southampton, examines how the experience of one community near Granada, in Nicaragua's coffee region, fits into the wider historiography of this transition in Latin America.

Working within a strictly Marxist conceptual framework, Dore explores how the community of Diriomo made the shift from subsistence agriculture to coffee plantations, and she also studies patterns of gender relations during this time period. While she draws heavily from earlier monographs on Latin American history, she also challenges the opinion put forth by some historians that debt peonage and the transition to coffee production led to the establishment of capitalism in the region. Dore makes the case that, at least in Diriomo, debt peonage did not represent a transition to free labor but, rather, was coercive, if not especially violent. In adopting this view, she challenges the findings of Arnold Bauer and Alan Knight in their studies, respectively, of Chile and Mexico; her findings are more in agreement with those of David McCreery, author of *Rural Guatemala, 1760–1940* (1994). Although she finds some common ground as well with the recent works on Nicaragua by Jeffrey Gould and Julie Charlip, she nevertheless differs from their conclusions about how events unfolded there during this period.

In literate and persuasive prose, Dore presents a fine case history of a community

within the broader context of Nicaraguan and Latin American development. In her initial chapter, she lays down “Theories of Capitalism, Class, Gender, and Ethnicity,” which she follows with a historical chapter that explains how Indians disappeared from Diriomo as an identifiable ethnic group. A third chapter takes up the evolution of patriarchal power in the village, while a fourth explains, with many examples, how the transition from community property to private property occurred. A brief fifth chapter describes, in considerable detail, “Gendered Contradictions of Liberalism: Ethnicity, Property, and Households,” followed by an elaborate discussion of debt peonage in Diriomo, certainly the most substantive chapter in the book. Chapter seven examines “the ways patriarchal privileges were reworked to fortify planters’ control over the peasantry” (p. 15). In conclusion, Dore restates her central thesis that “land privatization and peonage did not bring about capitalist transformation of rural Granada from 1870 to 1930” (p. 164). In a brief epilogue, she reiterates her contention that the failure of the Sandinistas in the 1980s to understand the history of Nicaragua accounted for their policies that alienated many rural working folk from their cause.

Diriomo’s experience, in Dore’s opinion, supports the theory of Karl Polanyi, promulgated in *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (1944). Thus, a major portion of her book explores the question of whether peasant labor in Diriomo was driven by market forces or coerced by patriarchal coffee planters and other landlords; that is, she asks, Was it a *market society* or a *society with markets*? She offers ample evidence that Diriomo was a society with markets, in which labor was controlled primarily by the landlords, who imposed a coercive form of debt peonage. Therefore, in her view, the reorganization did not represent a transition to capitalism. She also describes the changing role of gender in this process. She contends that liberalism in Nicaragua—and elsewhere in Latin America—while providing increased legal freedom for women simultaneously intensified the patriarchal nature of society. She demonstrates that the percentage of peasant women owning land in Diriomo was higher than the percentage of women belonging to the landowning elite. Because, in her view, the transition to a proletariat had not occurred among these peasants, Nicaragua was not ready for a Marxist class revolution, and she attributes the Sandinistas’ failure to win over a large number of peasants in the 1980s to their erroneous belief that the transition to

capitalism had actually occurred. In fact, what had happened was an increase in peasant ownership of small plots of land. Thus many peasants resisted the Sandinistas' efforts to establish collective or state farms and eventually supported the Contras against the Sandinista government.

Dore's book is grounded in the painstaking research she carried out in the Archivo Municipal de Diriomo, in other Nicaraguan archives, and in the Archivo General de Centroamérica in Guatemala; she also consulted a broad representation of Nicaraguan newspapers, published government reports, and secondary materials. She interviewed many Diriomeños and took down their oral histories, recounted from their working-class perspective. A good map, many tables, and several photographs taken by the author of people in Diriomo enhance the text.

Some readers may find Dore's Marxist theoretical framework too strident and lacking in pragmatic understanding of the role of coffee production in Latin American economic history, yet she portrays one community in great depth. Her conclusions concur with much of the historiography on the Liberal period in Central America. However, in using Nicaragua to challenge theories developed on Mexico, Chile, or elsewhere, she has overlooked several works on Central American history that support her thesis.

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