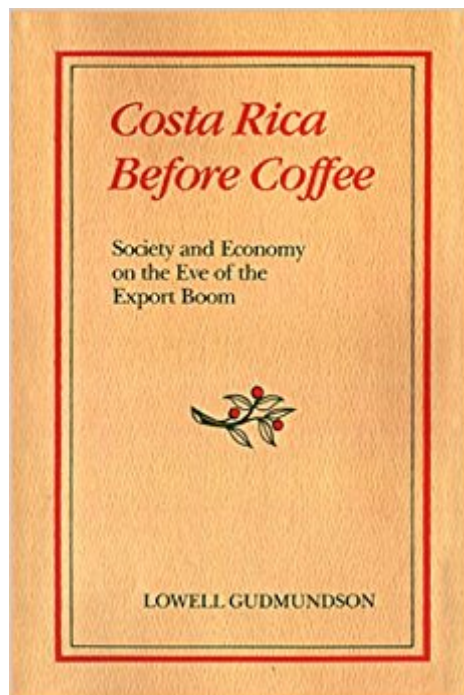




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Costa Rica Before Coffee: Society And Economy On The Eve Of The Export Boom



Synopsis

Costa Rica Before Coffee centers on the decade of the 1840s, when the impact of coffee and export agriculture began to revolutionize Costa Rican society. Lowell Gudmundson focuses on the nature of the society prior to the coffee boom, but he also makes observations on the entire sweep of Costa Rican history, from earliest colonial times to the present, and in his final chapter compares the country's development and agrarian structures with those of other Latin American nations. These wide-ranging applications follow inevitably, since the author convincingly portrays the 1840s as the key decade in any interpretation of Costa Rican history. Gudmundson synthesizes and questions the existing historical literature on Costa Rica, relegating much of it to the realm of myth. He attacks what he calls the rural democratic myth (or rural egalitarian model) of Costa Rica's past, a myth that he argues has pervaded the country's historiography and politics and has had a huge impact on its image abroad and on its citizens' self-image. The rural democratic myth paints a rather idyllic picture of the country's past. It holds that prior to the coffee boom, the vast majority of Costa Rica's population was made up of peasants who owned small farms and were largely self-sufficient. These peasants enjoyed a high degree of social and economic equality; there were no important social distinctions and little division of labor. According to the myth, the primary source of this relatively egalitarian social order was the period of colonial rule, which ended in 1821. The new developments wrought by coffee and agrarian capitalism are seen as destructive of this rural democracy and as leading directly to unprecedented social problems that arose as a result of division of labor, rapid population growth, and widespread class antagonism. Gudmundson rejects virtually all of the components of this rural egalitarian model for pre-coffee society and reinterprets the early impact of coffee. He uses an array of sources, including census records, notary archives, and probate inventories, many of them previously unknown or unused, to analyze the country's social hierarchy, the division of labor, the distribution of wealth, various forms of private and communal land tenure, differentiation between cities and villages, household and family structure, and the elite before and after the rise of coffee. His powerful conclusion is that rather than reflecting the complexities of Costa Rican history, the rural egalitarian model is largely a construct of coffee culture itself, used to support the order that supplanted the colonial regime. Gudmundson ultimately reveals that the conceptual framework of the rural democratic myth has been limiting both to its supporters and to its opponents. *Costa Rica Before Coffee* proposes an alternative to the myth, one that emphasizes the complexity of agrarian history and breaks important new ground.

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Customer Reviews

Lowell Gudmundson is professor of latin american studies and history at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Lowell Gudmundson is professor of latin american studies and history at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts.

The author specializes in agrarian and social history of Central America. He has taught in Costa Rica and at FIU, Oklahoma, and currently at Mt. Holyoke. He has chaired both LASA and CLAH. His recent work on identity constructs such as race and ethnicity suggests that Africans and their descendants suppressed their racial identities (see www.nuevomundo.revues.org, Debates 2010, *“Africanos y afrodescendientes en Centroamérica: fuentes y estrategias recientes para su estudio,”* *Revista de Historia de la Universidad de Costa Rica* 18/12/2009). *Costa Rica Before Coffee* explores the “White Legend” of the country’s reputation as the “Switzerland of Central America.” *Costa Rica*’s success appears to be due to two features that distinguish it from other Hispanic American nations: its relative poverty and marginal importance within the colonial empire, which left it isolated and largely free of the divisive, corrupting Spanish influences and institutional baggage; and its post-1850s development by British investors. Because of the sparse Indian population, there was never enough labor to support encomienda or repartimiento-based haciendas, or enough exploitable ores to support a viable mining industry. Until the 19th century, modest gains were

achieved from cacao and later tobacco production, with limited importation of African slaves. The general pre-independence economy was a creole and mestizo *finca* "village system" of *finca* "subsistence and barter." British interests financed the expansion of coffee cultivation and export, the creation of modern infrastructure such as railroads and port facilities, and the first domestic bank, while British merchants flooded the country with British commercial goods. Although coffee accounted for 75-95% of export commodities during the latter half of the 19th century, Costa Rica never became a fully monocrop economy, but developed sugar, cattle, and food crops for local consumption and limited trade. With a highly mobile and independent peasantry and growing merchant and artisan middle class, agricultural transformation in the country was *finca* "relatively bloodless." Of interest, despite the preponderance of British economic activity, Costa Rica did not become a virtual or actual British colony, despite the short-lived attempts of William Walker to rule the region from his base in Nicaragua in the middle of the century. The coffee export economy began to stagnate in the 1930s for the same reasons articulated by the Steins in Brazil: lack of more virgin land for settlement and cultivation, soil depletion of established plantations, and external market conditions. The introduction of bananas for export by the U.S. based United Fruit Company in the early 20th century strengthened the influence of foreign monopoly capital in the hands of local oligarchic elites who gradually became pseudo-hacendados competing for political supremacy in a series of coups and counter-coups. The 1940s ushered in a period of social unrest that culminated in the revolution of 1948, known as the *Liberaci3n Nacional*, under the guidance of academic economist-turned political activist Rodrigo Facio. The Revolution sought national vindication by state intervention in the areas of financial and agricultural reforms. Facio's "national democratic" ideology blamed coffee and later banana plantations for Costa Rica's inequality and class-based antagonism, since the formation of large landholdings had forced the traditional subsistence peasantry out of business and into poverty. It may come as a surprise to modern readers that, according to Facio, peasant smallholdings were the traditional "Spanish colonial heritage." Gudmundson labels Facio's platform a "petty bourgeois" intellectual origin myth of democratic heritage that was used not to advocate for regressive policies, but as "objective possibilities worth struggling for," a sort of utilitarian liberal back-to-the-future ideology, as opposed to a romanticized conservative forward-into-the-past oligopoly. Facio's goal, reminiscent of 19th century Mexico and Colombia inter alia, was redistribution of land and recreation

of a rural egalitarian society of smallholders and subsistence farmers. The latter

“underlying ideological and historical vision” was, according to the author, unchanged when this book was published, and was a powerful driver of Costa Rican political discourse. The problem with this vision is of course the notion that an “undifferentiated pre-capitalist society” ever existed in Costa Rica’s indigenous communities or colonial neo-feudal mercantile systems of production and exchange. This is where Gudmundson intervenes, beginning with a detailed post-1960s historiography and followed by his own quantitative and qualitative analysis using a thesis-antithesis-synthesis method. Earlier narratives supported smallholder predominance in coffee cultivation into the 1930s (Carolyn Hall, Jos   Luis Vega Carballo); these were contradicted by claims of post-1850s direct exploitation of smallholders by consolidated elites (Moretzsohn de Andrade, Samuel Stone). As of 1986, the scholarly consensus was that coffee oligarchs were an endogamous group descended directly from “early conquering families,” proof of pre-coffee inequality not unlike Wasserman’s,   s Terrazas. Until coffee, however, elites did not have the economic means to exert control over isolated subsistence communities, out of which the jornalero proletariat would emerge. The theoretical missing links addressed by Gudmundson are the formation of the smallholder regime to begin with, since ejidos and communal lands were not, technically speaking, smallholds with clear titles and tenure; and the “organic link between elite and mass before coffee,” or how the elites essentially conquered the countryside in an analog to Topik and Wells’s “Second Conquest.” It is this transformation that Gudmundson seeks to unravel in support of his thesis: the modern private smallholder is not “the continuation of pre-coffee land-tenure patterns and socioeconomic tendencies.” Gudmundson shreds Facio’s origin myth of pre-coffee rural democracy: subsistence communities were not isolated and dispersed, but were nucleated; communal lands were combined with large and small holdings with a variety of tenure arrangements; and social stratification and inequality were widespread in all groups and settings, both urban and rural. Broadly speaking, Costa Rica differed from generalized Latin American models primarily in terms of demographics and scale, as well as the shorter time involved in the transition to agro-export economy. However, land holdings did in fact remain predominantly small until the WW I period. Foreign wealth was concentrated among the processors and exporters, and expanded to large land holdings only after 1930. There was no static, idealized past. Gudmundson does not refer to caciques or caudillos, only dictators. There was no rapid

urbanization by peasants fleeing repression in the countryside; migrations to the countryside afforded workers upward social mobility. Gudmundson makes clear, however, that his work represents the antithesis to the myth. The final synthesis had not been written as of the book's publication. In both the colonial and post-independence periods, Costa Rican peasants were "thoroughly mercantile," a development pattern that differed from the forced Indian labor of Guatemala or the land concentration and proletarianization of El Salvador and Mexico. The concentration of land in Costa Rica lasted only two or three decades, and soon erupted in revolution. In a sense, the transition to agrarian capitalism involved the full participation of the peasantry, and not as peons. Gudmundson claims that this capitalist peasantry accounts for the failure among Marxist and "antibourgeois" historians to properly account for Costa Rica's unique trajectory, in which dependency and repression simply do not fit. The rural democratic myth, rather than an idealized past, was actually a modern creation of the coffee producing peasant smallholders and petty bourgeoisie. The great strength of the book lies in the author's exhaustive documentation of archival sources for census and production figures, which he fully exploited during his seven-year tenure as a professor in San José. The appendices also provide lists of leading import-export merchants and notarial probate records of elites. The tabular historiography, sorted by authors and periods, lists theses, main points, and counterpoints, and is a priceless tool for further research. His use of Latin American research and scholarship provides refreshing perspectives that differ from formulaic U.S. production during the 1980s. Gudmundson combines the new economic history with social history, including a breakdown of labor forms and wages over time, and women's roles in rural and urban settings, including treatment of female heads of households that was ahead of its time, and a discussion of reproductive behavior and family formation that would make any anthropologist giddy. A section on servitude shows clear differences from other Latin American societies: as early as 1814, urban householders were required to send their servants' children to public school under penalty of fines; even people considered nominally poor had servants; and what would otherwise pass for slavery or paternalistic vassalage, i.e. non-wage labor in exchange for food and shelter, was a primarily urban phenomenon. Servitude was reportedly voluntary; not surprisingly, most servants were "descendants of former slaves, recruits from Indian or mestizo villages, or from the city's poorer sections." This enduring institutional inequality was not the result of foreign capital for export commodities, and was not representative of egalitarian

democracy. The only weakness of the book was its lack of discussion of race and ethnicity. Although Gudmundson criticizes other histories for homogenizing the peasantry, he effectively does the same thing by failing to account for these vital factors. Instead, he alludes to them only in passing. There is no discussion of slavery or debt peonage. In fairness to him, he did say that the book was but one counter argument, which leaves plenty of room for discussion.

I agree with the Costa Rican reviewer, Gudmundson lifts the liberal blinders that coffee barons lead to an agricultural hegemony completely detrimental to the previous ways of life! Another book which lucidly discusses these issues is "Costa Rica: The Last Country The Gods Made" by Colesberry & McLean, in the chapter, "Coffee! Costa Rica's First Revolution." I recommend both books for enlightened reading!

Costa Rica Before Coffee is a book that clearly states that the myth of the land-holding self-sufficient peasant isn't true. Many Costa Ricans believe that before coffee our country was a paradise in which everybody used to own land and where there were no discrepancies in the society. With elegance, statistics and history; Lowell clearly explains that coffee helped reinforce the democratic model in Costa Rica instead of undermining it.

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