

THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF DICTATORSHIP
DEMOCRACY AND
SOCIALIST REVOLUTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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**The Social Origins of Dictatorship, Democracy and
Socialist Revolution in Central America**

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We are all students of Barrington Moore, Jr., not only those of us on the panel like Professors Skocpol and Tilly, who had the privilege of studying directly with him, or like Professor Goldstone, with one of his students (in this case Professor Skocpol), but also those like Professors Brustein, Eckstein and myself who have been profoundly influenced by his work. It would be fair to say that Barrington Moore, Jr. created the modern study of revolution just as he contributed profoundly to the current golden age of comparative historical sociology and the revival of political sociology represented by this section. In this year of anniversaries of revolutions great and small, the French, the Chinese, the Cuban, the Nicaraguan, it is only fitting that we turn to an examination of the ideas of a man who restored the study of revolution to a central place at the core of the sociological discipline. His Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy remains the most widely accepted and influential theory not only of revolution but of the origins of democracy, authoritarianism, and revolutionary socialism.

El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, three small countries in a region that was once the most obscure corner of the Spanish colonial empire, may seem a strange place to begin an evaluation of a theory based on studies of the great revolutions, the French, the Chinese, and implicitly but fundamentally, the Russian. Indeed Moore himself (1966, xiii) cautions against the study of small countries since "the decisive causes of their politics lie outside their boundaries," although he acknowledges a certain discomfort at bypassing some worthy, if diminutive, revolutions in such obscure places as the Korean peninsula, Cuba, and Indochina. But the cases of Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua present us with a fortuitous natural experiment in the study of revolutions since they contain within themselves Moore's three routes into the modern political world -- democracy, authoritarianism, and revolutionary socialism.

Indeed, it would be difficult to find three political systems anywhere in the world that differ among themselves as much as do contemporary Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Costa Rica has the longest lived democracy in Latin America. Since 1889, when it held the first fully free election in Latin America, Costa Rica has, with the exception of two brief periods in

1917-1919 and 1948, operated as a democracy. Since 1948, Costa Rica has been the only country in Latin America to continuously hold free elections contested by more than one political party. In 1986 Oscar Arias Sanchez was elected president after defeating his party's chosen candidate in a contested primary as well as winning the subsequent free election. El Salvador, by contrast, suffered under what is, arguably, the longest lived military dictatorship in Latin America from 1932 to 1979, and the military still holds a dominant position in spite of nominally contested elections in 1984 and 1989. On June 1 of this year Alfredo Cristiani of the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party, widely described as neo-fascist by its opponents, assumed office as president of El Salvador. While professing democracy, Cristiani failed to distance himself from party founder and admirer of Adolf Hitler, Roberto D'Aubuisson. Nicaragua is one of only two surviving socialist states in the Western Hemisphere and the only one on the continental mainland. The slogan of the seventh anniversary of its revolution in 1986 could stand for the tenth as well -- "the greatest triumph is to have survived." Democracy, neo-facism, and revolutionary socialism, Moore's three paths, are all present in contemporary Central America.

Furthermore, the three countries share a number of historical and structural similarities including a common isthmian location, a common history of foreign domination, and a common origin in the same province of the Spanish colonial empire. All are small, peripheral agricultural export economies dependent on one or two primary commodities, and in all three one commodity, coffee, has been the major source of wealth, foreign exchange, government revenue, and political power from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. In all three countries an agrarian elite of coffee growers, processors, and exporters ruled almost without interruption until the second half of the twentieth century and, to a greater or lesser degree, control the fate of these nations to this day. The capitalist transformation of agriculture which figures so prominently in Moore's theory came to Central America with the nineteenth-century coffee trade. Despite all of these similarities both the behavior of these coffee elites and the political systems they shaped could not have been more divergent.

What accounts for this divergence? In Social Origins Moore argues that democracy is a product of an assault by an insurgent bourgeoisie on a backward landed aristocracy ("no bourgeoisie, no democracy" [1966:414]), that authoritarian "fascist" regimes result from a coalition between a dominant landed aristocracy and a weak bourgeoisie, and that socialist revolution occurs when a mass revolt of cohesive peasant villages overwhelms a strong landed elite and a weak bourgeoisie constrained by a powerful agrarian state. None of these things, however, is true of the social origins of dictatorship, democracy, or socialist revolution in Central America.

First, in none of these countries is there a collision between an industrial bourgeoisie and a landed class. In all three cases an agrarian bourgeoisie of coffee producers combined land owning and industrial functions in a single class, and this pattern is in fact common throughout Latin America (Frank, 1969:399; Stavenhagen, 1968:2; Zeitlin and Ratcliff, 1988:181-192). Peripheral capitalism provides few opportunities for the development of an autonomous bourgeoisie, strong or weak, based on manufacturing for internal markets. Instead in Central America the demands of the world economy created a capitalist transformation based on the export of a primary agricultural commodity to the developed world. Traditional land owners, enterprising foreign immigrants, colonial and republican officials all rushed to acquire land and make themselves into capitalists, confounding the distinction between the two forms of property (Browning, 1971:169; Stone, 1982:40; Wheelock, 1980:17). Furthermore, the production of coffee itself created a technical division between cultivation or production proper and industrial processing of the harvested crop. Processors are industrial capitalists using an agricultural raw material while cultivators are land owners in labor intensive agriculture. The distinction between the two fractions does create divisions within Central American elites but the two fractions are linked by function, finance, ownership, and kinship into a single class (Dunkerly, 1982:54; Torres-Rivas, 1978:44-45; Winson, 1981:281-285). The ruling classes of Central America are neither backward agrarians nor an industrial bourgeoisie. They are instead an agrarian bourgeoisie. The closest historical parallels are Moore's modernizing English landlords.

Where this agrarian bourgeoisie of coffee producers and processors had most fully transformed itself into a capitalist class, in El Salvador, the result was not democracy but authoritarianism and neo-fascism. The Salvadoran agrarian bourgeoisie created the single most efficient coffee production system in the world and did so on a fully capitalist basis, employing wage labor which, by the 1920s, had already begun to lose most of its remaining ties to the land. Extra-economic coercion, used extensively in coffee cultivation in neighboring Guatemala, was unnecessary in El Salvador because nineteenth-century land expropriations had created a large reserve army of landless, migratory coffee pickers who were politically repressed but paid wages (Baloyra, 1982:25-27; Menjivar, 1980:142-143; Paige, 1987; White, 1973:118-119). The economically backward Junker allies of German fascism are nowhere to be found in El Salvador. Yet it was precisely these progressive agrarian capitalists that supported the bloodiest repression in the region's history during the matanza (massacre) of 1932 and unflinchingly backed a repressive military dictatorship for almost fifty years. They did so not because they needed servile labor to survive in a world market but because they needed repression to put down a militant, organized proletariat. It was not labor repressive agriculture that drove the Salvadorans to neo-fascism but rather revolutionary socialism. The Salvadoran case raises the possibility that a bourgeoisie, agrarian or industrial, supports democracy only when it is not faced with a revolutionary challenge from below.

Democracy in Costa Rica did not come into being as a result of a "bourgeois revolution," since the agrarian bourgeoisie backed counter-revolution, but rather through the actions of middle class intellectuals, workers, and small farmers. The Costa Rican bourgeoisie, which had lost much of its control over the land and become an elite of industrial coffee processors, supported only limited "bourgeois" democracy which they controlled through paternalism and outright fraud (Cardoso, 1977:192-193; Stone, 1982:215-237). When they were faced with a militant communist-led working class that threatened their control they too turned to armed counter-revolution and backed Josb Figueres' 1948 anti-Communist revolt. To their surprise and dismay Figueres and his middle class intellectual supporters came to terms with their working class

opponents, enlisted the support of the urban middle classes and enterprising small farmers, and relegated their erstwhile allies to a political obscurity where they have languished for more than forty years (Arminger, 1978:69-70; Stone, 1982:313-314; Winson, 1981:135-136). Costa Rican democracy is based on the middle class intellectuals and small farmers who have been its principal beneficiaries. It was established by revolutionary workers who achieved substantial although more limited benefits. Fortunately, an unarmed bourgeoisie was unable to prevent these developments.

Democracy was in fact the ideology of the backward land owners of Nicaragua, not the progressive capitalists of El Salvador or the agro-industrialists of Costa Rica, and in the end their actions contributed to a socialist, not a democratic revolution, based on a revolt of the urban poor, not the peasantry. Weakened by United States intervention, civil war, and the Somoza dynasty the landowners of Nicaragua never succeeded in carrying out a capitalist transformation, agrarian or industrial, and remained in 1979 the most backward and least capitalist of the three coffee elites (Biderman, 1983:12; Deere and Marchetti, 1981:44; Wheelock, 1980:42-44). Their support for democracy came not as a result of a successful capitalist challenge but rather from arrested capitalist development. It was based on opposition to the corruption and tyranny of the Somozas' personal dictatorship (Gilbert, 1985; 1988:105-127; Paige, 1989; Vilas, 1986:132). In Nicaragua democracy became a tool to advance the interests of a frustrated bourgeoisie, while in El Salvador, by contrast, it became, after 1932, an impediment to continued bourgeois hegemony. No peasant revolt broke out in Nicaragua because by 1979 there was little or no traditional peasantry left to revolt. It was not backward looking, traditional peasant communities which provided the dynamite that exploded the old order, but rather the floating informal proletariat of country and city created by the capitalist transformation of agriculture (Lopez et al., 1980:185-186; Vilas, 1986:118-119). Capitalism, not peasant communitarianism, once more proved to be revolutionary.

How could Moore have gone so wrong? Are there any general lessons that can be learned from these startling exceptions to Moore's thesis? It seems apparent that Moore's decision to

ignore peripheral cases of which he knew little was not sound methodology. Central American revolutions are not caused by powerful countries "outside their boundaries." The United States, for example, has had remarkably little success in influencing them despite concerted and expensive efforts to do so. But there are also deeper problems that go to the heart of Moore's argument. First, as analysts of European historical developments have recently argued, the bourgeoisie has seldom played the decisive role in the development of full parliamentary democracy based on universal suffrage (Blackbourne and Eley, 1984; Stephens, 1989; Thernborn, 1977). Instead other classes, including in Central America workers, intellectuals, small farmers, and even repressed land owners, have made a contribution to its development. What the Central American bourgeoisie wanted was limited or bourgeois democracy as in Costa Rica. The concept of a "bourgeois revolution" leading automatically to parliamentary democracy may finally be ready for decent burial by Marxists and non-Marxists alike.

Second, bourgeois support for even limited or bourgeois democracy is highly contingent and related to the absence of a challenge from below. The El Salvadoran elite in 1932 faced the only mass Communist insurrection in the history of Latin America. It is impossible to understand their ferocious authoritarianism without an appreciation of this event. A bourgeoisie, agrarian or industrial, under revolutionary pressure may be just as dangerous to human freedom as a backward landed aristocracy.

Third, the triumph of revolutionary socialism is closely tied to the advance of imperialism. The weak, backward, agrarian bourgeoisie of Nicaragua was not a consequence of a powerful agrarian bureaucracy, either colonial Spanish or Mesoamerican, but rather of imperial controls imposed by the United States. Similar imperial controls leading to a similarly weakened and frustrated bourgeoisie were critical to the success of both the Cuban and the Vietnamese revolutions (Lieberman, 1989; Williams, 1966:191-192).

Fourth, socialist revolution is a consequence of capitalist pulverization of the peasantry, not a persistence of communitarian patterns. In this latter contention Moore might have been misled by the Russian case that he knew so well. The capitalist transformation of the peasantry

was as important to the success of the Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions as it was to the Nicaraguan (Lieberman, 1989; MacEwan, 1985:421-422; Paige, 1975:333). In short, the socialist transformation of the periphery is a result of the capitalist incorporation of these areas under imperial control, not of the persistence of backward social formations. Socialism is not the last gasp of dying social classes but the desperate hope of new classes generated in the capitalist periphery.

For Moore, socialist revolution was the unintended consequence of actions by backward-looking classes that led only to dictatorship -- hence the facile contrast between democracy and the equivalent dictatorships of fascism and communism in the title of Social Origins. If there is a hero in Moore's book it is the modernizing, industrial bourgeoisie of the imperial United States at mid-century, defending democracy against the heirs of backward agrarian orders in the parallel dictatorships of fascism and communism. But in Central America the agrarian bourgeoisie, aided by this triumphant bourgeoisie, has violently opposed democracy in El Salvador, reluctantly supported it in Costa Rica, and even desperately fought for it in Nicaragua. In Central America more reliable allies in the search for human freedom have been found among yeoman farmers, militant workers, and middle class intellectuals. A triumphant bourgeoisie has, since Immanuel Wallerstein's long sixteenth century, transformed the world, but not necessarily in directions of its own choosing. The expansion of the scope of human freedom, first in the great democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century and now in the great socialist transformations of the twentieth, we owe not to this all-conquering bourgeoisie but rather to farmers and artisans, factory workers and students, poets and journalists, ordinary men and ordinary women who sought human dignity in the future, not mechanical solidarity in the past. It is they who are the true heroes and the true heroines of the revolutions we honor today.

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