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Coffee and Indigenous Labor in Guatemala, 1871–1980

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Not until after the mid-nineteenth century did Guatemala become an important producer of coffee. The economy had languished during the last years of the colony and those immediately following independence because of political turmoil, locust infestations, and the separation of El Salvador, which produced the captaincy's main cash crop, indigo. In the 1840s and 1850s exports rebounded modestly with cochineal, a red dye made from the bodies of insects that lived on nopal cacti. The dye found a strong demand among domestic and foreign textile producers, and plantations and small holdings flourished around Amatitlán and Antigua, in the southwest of the country. But while cochineal could be very profitable in good years, production was a highly speculative activity, and a short rain shower at the wrong time or an unanticipated cold snap could ruin a year's work. In any event, production involved only a small part of the country and a few thousand workers. Led by the Economic Society of the Friends of the Country, a prodevelopment association subsidized by the government, a few landowners and Indian communities began to experiment with coffee in the 1850s and 1860s, in some places interplanting it with the cochineal. Expectations for the new crop were high.[1]

But transition to coffee proved to be neither swift nor simple. Lessons learned planting coffee in Colombia and Costa Rica did not transfer easily to the soil and climate of Guatemala; several early efforts ended in

[1] On the early history of coffee in Guatemala, see Ignacio Solís, *Memoria de la Casa de Moneda de Guatemala y del desarrollo económico del país*, 6 vol., (Guatemala City, 1979); Julio C. Castellanos, *Coffee and Peasants in Guatemala* (Stockholm, 1985); and David McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760–1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), chap. 6.

disaster. Cochineal had its risks, and markets for natural dyes declined sharply in the 1860s with the appearance of new chemical dyes. But it is always difficult to convince agriculturalists to rip up what they know and essay what they do not, at least until a few pioneers show the way. Capital was in short supply. What was available found a steady demand in trade and commerce, at better rates and better security than that available for the fledgling commodity of coffee. The fact, too, that the new crop took four or five years of investment before it entered full production aggravated capital problems. Early growers had to string together money from family members, commercial credit, and loans backed by collateral such as urban property to finance their first coffee estates (fincas). Once production was under way, they could usually obtain current account financing from merchant houses or loans from foreigners with access to overseas capital at lower rates.[2] But long-term agricultural credit remained hard to obtain and always was expensive. Because so much of it came from foreign-controlled sources, each downturn in the economy, and the resulting foreclosures, put more and more land and production into the hands of non-Guatemalans.

Technology threw up similar obstacles to the expansion of the new crop.[3] Although early exporters such as Costa Rica got by initially with selling dry processed coffee, by the 1860s European markets more and more demanded a quality of product available only with wet processing. This required that growers invest heavily in tanks and drying facilities or be forced to sell their harvest at low prices to processors that had the requisite equipment. Such capital and processing demands favored medium and large estates over family farms, and set a pattern for Guatemalan development quite different from that of Costa Rica or Puerto Rico.[4]

[2] Most evident and most successful were Germans: Regina Wagner, *Los alemanes en Guatemala, 1828–1944* (Guatemala City, 1991).

[3] Mauricio Dominguez, "The Development of a Technological and Scientific Coffee Industry in Guatemala, 1830–1930," Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1970.

[4] For Costa Rica, see Ciro Flamarión Cardoso, "The Formation of the Coffee Estates in Nineteenth-century Costa Rica," in K. Duncan and I. Rutledge, *Land and Labour in Latin America* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1977); for Puerto Rico, see Laird Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); for Colombia, see Marcos Palacios, *Coffee in Colombia, 1850–1970* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1980). For comparison, see Stanley Stein, *Vassouras: A Brazilian Coffee County, 1850–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), and Warren Dean, *Rio Claro: A Brazilian Plantation System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976). For the sizes of Guatemala estates, see *The World's Coffee: Studies of the Principal Products of the World Market*, no. 9 (Rome, 1947), 136.

To develop large-scale coffee production, Guatemalan growers needed access to unprecedented amounts of the right kind of land. Much of this belonged to Guatemala's majority indigenous population, or so they long had claimed. Although by legal and illegal methods Spanish and creole settlers had appropriated large areas of Indian land during the colonial period, Spanish law nevertheless recognized indigenous rights, as the "ancient lords of the lands of the Americas before [European] conquest,"[5] and repeatedly confirmed village ownership of their community lands (ejidos). Rarely were the boundaries of these possessions adequately surveyed, however, and by the early nineteenth century the countryside was a welter of overlapping claims, of communities, haciendas, small farmers, ranchers, and the state (*baldíos*). In the absence of a widely grown cash crop, such confusions mattered little, but now coffee began to change this, touching off half a century of sometimes violent land conflict.

Apart from the early experiments at Amatitlán and Antigua, of which only the second prospered, coffee developed chiefly in two areas in Guatemala, the western piedmont (the Boca Costa) and the Alta Verapaz, in the northeast of the republic. Traditionally, there had been only a few towns in the lightly inhabited western piedmont, and coffee quickly overwhelmed these, converting many of the inhabitants into workers on fincas owned by outside investors.[6] But much of the Boca Costa was claimed by Indian communities that were located not in the piedmont itself but on the adjacent highlands. This was land they used seasonally to produce "tropical" crops such as cotton, peanuts, and short-season varieties of corn. In a number of cases, however, and over the considerable protests of the communities,[7] the state now confirmed their possession of only a small part of what they said they owned, declaring the rest state-owned *baldíos* and opening it up for sale to would-be coffee growers. Much of the land in the Alta Verapaz suitable for coffee also had community claims, and in some areas Indian villagers had pioneered the crop as an adjunct to their subsistence production. But state and merchant policies assumed the superior efficiency of large-scale, private production over that of the

[5] Archivo General de Centro América (hereafter AGCA), Tierras, 5989 52765.

[6] For an example of the history of the struggles of one such town, see AGCA, Ministerio de Gobernación (hereafter MG), 28564 153 and 157, 28588 135, 28589 234, 28593 120 and 145, and 28595 37 and 39.

[7] The papers of the Jefes Políticos in the AGCA, organized by department and year, hold hundreds of protests for communities about land loss. See the notes for McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, chap. 8.

communities, and gradually private fincas displaced Indian coffee and corn.

The most serious problem confronting large-scale production of the new export was a general and persistent shortage of labor. Early efforts made do with cochineal workers or women and children recruited from nearby villages.[8] Because coffee labor was seasonal, growers initially needed extra workers for only a few months a year. But as production expanded, and as it more obviously threatened the lands and livelihood of the indigenous population, labor became harder to obtain. Guatemala's place in world markets rested on the high quality of its coffee. This depended on a careful harvest, a process that, as the groves spread up and down the sides of the mountains, could take six months or more. Workers went over the same bushes repeatedly, picking each bean only as it ripened to a perfect red, and then carrying the day's pick to the processing sheds. Guatemalan elites shared in the prejudices of the time that privileged "white" workers and would have welcomed European immigrants to its labor force, but emigrants leaving Europe found North America, Argentina, or even Brazil more attractive. If large-scale coffee was to develop in Guatemala, it would have to do so figuratively and literally on the backs of the Indians.

The indigenous population of the western highlands resisted working on the coffee estates for various reasons. Their colonial experience with forced wage labor (*repartimientos*) had given them a horror of the insects, heat, and diseases they encountered in the hot country.[9] Mortality rates were staggering, and the survivors brought disease back to their home communities. The Indians also remembered the verbal and physical abuses they had suffered at the hands of landowners, foremen, and state agents who treated them as racial inferiors. Although some among the Indians went voluntarily to the lowlands as part of long-distance trade and others made brief visits there to cultivate tropical crops, the indigenous population sought as much as possible to avoid contact with non-Indians and, even more so, to avoid working for them in commercial agriculture.

Daunting, too, for those who hoped to recruit workers was the realization that, in general, the Indians did not need the money offered. The majority still had access to enough land and other resources in their home

[8] See the photographs in E. Bradford Burns, *Eadweard Muybridge in Guatemala, 1875* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[9] Murdo MacLeod, *Spanish Central America: A Socioeconomic History, 1520–1720* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), chap. 5.

communities to sustain themselves and their families. Their culture defined a limited range of "needs," needs that they could satisfy almost entirely from their own production and through barter exchange.[10] Their money requirements were still small and largely fixed – for example, church fees or state taxes – and usually they could easily meet these by selling some of their agricultural or handicraft production or by wage work nearby. They understood the advantages of higher wages and might seek these out where they became available, but usually only so as to be able to work for less time.[11] Guatemala's Indians in the 1870s and 1880s were not capitalist free workers, in the sense of having only their own labor to sell to support themselves, and most showed a distressing lack of interest in either capital accumulation or opportunities to participate in industrial consumer culture.

Anticipating the wealth possible if they could mobilize enough labor, planters demanded that the state intervene to force the Indians to work the export economy. But because much of the political support for the Conservatives and Rafael Carrera rested in these indigenous communities, the government generally resisted forced labor schemes. In 1871, however, coffee growers were instrumental in the Liberal Revolution of that year and soon held many important posts in the new regime. It should have been no surprise, then, that when the dust settled, the new government turned its attention to the labor question. In November of 1876, the president issued a decree reviving the forced labor drafts[12] – now called *mandamientos* – little used in the half-century since independence. As the system had operated during the eighteenth century, Guatemalan landowners short of workers applied to the Audiencia (the colonial appeals court/administrative council) for a order that required a community or communities to supply a certain number of workers to a landowner for a set number of days or indefinitely.[13] This was wage labor, and the law required employers to pay travel costs and wages in advance, if typically at below market rates. The 1876 presidential decree brought these drafts

[10] Planters and the state were constantly frustrated by the Indians' lack of "civilized needs." E.g., see Antonio Batres Jáuregui, *Los Indios: Su historia y su civilización* (Guatemala City, 1893).

[11] On this phenomenon, see Elliot Berg, "Backward Bending Labor Supply Functions in Dual Economies: The African Case," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (Aug. 1961): 468–92.

[12] *Recopilación de las leyes de Guatemala* (Guatemala City, 1881), vol. 1, p. 457.

[13] On repartimientos in colonial Guatemala, see Lesley Bird Simpson, *Studies in the Administration of New Spain*, vol. 3: *The Repartimiento System of Native Labor in New Spain and Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1938).

back, and a general labor law the following year refined the system:[14] Export producers in need of workers might apply for help to a *jefe político* (departmental governor). If the application was accepted, the jefe would order a given village to supply a certain number of workers, for two weeks at a time if job was in the department and a month if outside. These orders could be renewed. Employers paid the workers in advance, including travel time, and community officials were responsible for selecting those who would go to fill an order and for making sure that the men arrived at the right place on time. The Indians loathed *mandamientos* and as individuals and communities did all they could to avoid them. But a long history of forced wage labor made the drafts "custom" and gave them a patina of legitimacy.

Mandamientos furnished workers for the export sector, but the system was far from satisfactory. The labor was not cheap. A fundamental problem was the involvement of the *jefe político*. *Mandamientos* gave him control over much of the labor in his district, labor he sometimes used himself or, and more commonly, for which he demanded bribes: "It required a certain courage to confront the departmental boss and ask for a *mandamiento*. That terrible personage was for the planters something of a god dwelling in a sanctuary difficult and fearsome to enter and only accessible to those who made sacks of golden disks sound before the doors."[15] Employers paid workers' wages as a lump sum in advance, and some or all of this might be siphoned off by the jefe or by corrupt community officials before it reached the men. Even if the workers received their pay, *mandamientos* were still forced labor. Most of those drafted worked resentfully and with little enthusiasm or initiative. Others responded by refusing to go, by fleeing the community or by escaping from the work gang on the way to the coast or on the return from from the finca. Because of the turnover, employers had little opportunity to train the workers in specialized tasks or to keep those who proved particularly adept.

For the Indians, the *mandamiento* was paid labor but poorly paid, and the men had little control over where they went or what they did. The drafts might take them out of their communities just when they needed to work on their own crops or leave their plantings vulnerable to predators or bad weather or theft. On the fincas they were exposed to disease and heat, conditions sometimes aggravated by inadequate housing and difficult working conditions. Employers frequently tried to keep them at

[14] *Recopilación . . . Guatemala*, vol. 2, pp. 69–75.

[15] *Diario de Centro América* (Guatemala City), Jan. 29, 1919.

work longer than the order provided, typically by assigning them tasks (*tareas*) that could not be completed in the time available. Since *mandamiento* workers brought their own food, they faced serious problems if not allowed a timely return to their villages. Those who complained or resisted were showered with abuse, beaten, or jailed. Many workers died; survivors staggered back to their communities exhausted, perhaps to find their crops ruined and their families hungry or another *mandamiento* order awaiting them.[16]

Mandamientos were satisfactory neither to employers nor to workers, but they survived until at least 1920 because they served an important purpose for the coffee economy. Under the labor law of 1877, and detailed more closely in the 1894 revision, the only practical way an indigenous male could escape being forced into the *mandamientos* was to be able to prove that he had a contract for labor in the export sector. The 1894 law exempted from the drafts: "1. Seasonal workers 16 years or older owning 30 pesos or more for labor . . . ; 2. *Colonos* (resident workers) . . . who owned 15 pesos or more; 3. Indians who could show a contract for at least three months labor on a finca of coffee, sugar cane, cacao, or large-scale banana cultivation."[17] That is, the only viable alternative to repeatedly being sent on *mandamientos* was to be indebted to an export finca. Not only were the *jefe político* and community officials supposed to honor the exemption that such a debt provided, but employers too had a strong incentive to defend the men they had under contract from the forced drafts. As a result, almost every eligible indigenous man, and many women, in the accessible parts of the highlands soon bound themselves to one or more export properties. The search for workers to fill *mandamientos* pushed further and further into the peripheries, in turn forcing more of the population into debt contracts. By the turn of the century, village after village was reporting that there was no one left to be drafted.

The key to the functioning of this debt labor system was the *habilitador* (labor contractor). These men lived or traveled regularly in the highlands, giving out wage advances and signing up workers for the plantations. A few, called *contratistas*, operated independently, contracting men on their own and reselling these obligations to the highest bidder, but most

[16] For a typical series of protests against *mandamiento* conditions, in this case the villages of Santa María de Jesus and San Lucas Sacatepéquez against finca Mauricio, see AGCA, Jefe Político, Sacatepéquez, 1886, Santa María, Aug. 20 and 21, 1886, and San Lucas, May 10 and Aug. n.d., 1886, and the responses of the owner E. Lehnoff, June 21, Aug. 23, and Sept. 1, 1886.

[17] *Diario de Centro América*, Feb. 22–24, 1894.

habilitadores were employed by only one or two fincas. They made their money on a per head fee for the men they signed up, as well as a commission on the number of days these men labored on the plantation. Inevitably, there was competition and even conflict among the recruiters in their scramble to contract workers. By law, for example, it was forbidden to sign up a man already obligated to another property, but *habilitadores* did it anyway, blaming the men for any resulting confusion and plunging the fincas into extensive legal battles over the "ownership" of workers. Recruiters dispensed alcohol freely: "There is an unceasing coming and going of labour contractors in Nebaj. And there is rum [*aguardiente*]. The place stinks of it. The rum business and the coffee business work together."[18] Owners of drink shops commonly ran side businesses indebting Indians and forcing them to sign labor contracts. If the men woke up the next morning and resisted going to the coast, the recruiters turned to the local authorities for support, and travelers reported conveys of workers roped together and marched under guard to the coast.

Actually, as evident in the wording of the 1894 law, there were two types of indebted workers. Some of these were *colonos*, men who lived with their families more or less permanently on the fincas and who, in return for access to land for subsistence farming and wages for day labor, submitted themselves to the everyday control of the owner. A few came from the piedmont towns overrun by coffee, and others were ladinos (non-Indians) who migrated from the eastern part of Guatemala, but most were Indians who had abandoned their communities of origin in the highlands to live on the coffee estates. Why would they do this? Some had committed crimes at home or had lost their rights to land because of alcohol abuse or gambling; others were fleeing a bad marriage or tensions in their family. The number of resident *colonos* varied widely among properties and over time, but they were particularly important in the Alta Verapaz.[19] There coffee plantations directly engulfed village ejidos, leaving the Indians the option of fleeing to remote areas or remaining where they were but now as dependent labor. To leave was not easy, given the Indians' commitment to the burial places of their ancestors and their recognition of telluric deities associated with specific mountains and caves. Anyway, if they tried to

[18] Robert Burkitt, "Explorations in the Highlands of Western Guatemala," *Museum Journal* (University of Pennsylvania) 21, no. 1 (1930): 58–59.

[19] Arden King, *Cobán and the Verapaz: History and Cultural Process in Northern Guatemala* (New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute publication no. 37, 1974), and Guillermo Nañez Falcón, "Erwin Paul Dieseldorff, German Entrepreneur in the Alta Verapaz of Guatemala, 1889–1937," Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1970.

escape the pull of coffee by settling in an unclaimed area, "somebody buys the land and puts them to work, or else they have to run further away."[20]

More common than *colonos* were *temporalistas*, or temporary workers, who left their villages for two to six months a year to work on the coffee fincas. Whatever their debts, they demanded and got additional wage advances each year from the *habilitador*, who organized them into gangs and dispatched them to the estate as required. Or, rather, he tried to, for the Indians were no more enthusiastic about working off what they owed than they were about *mandamientos*, and they employed similar strategies of resistance. Such difficulties aside, seasonal labor had real advantages for the export sector. Most important, workers supported themselves when not required for labor on the fincas. The employers did not have to provide wages adequate to support the workers and their families year round or fund the reproduction and training of replacement workers, as is the case with free labor. Instead, they paid only for the weeks or months of work they actually needed, and that at wages depressed by the effects of *mandamiento* coercion.

There were costs for the employers, of course. Properties carried on their books the debts of hundreds or even thousands of laborers, tying up capital or forcing employers to borrow the money at interest. Workers died or ran away and their debt might be lost. Overall, the *finqueros* (estate owners) would have preferred a system in which the Indians worked without advances, but the Indians stubbornly resisted this. If they had to work and only a debt protected them from *mandamiento* drafts, they would extract as much money as possible from the estates. The government and employers had the coercive power of the army, the telegraph, and the repeating rifle on their side. But the indigenous population had the numbers and an awareness that without their participation the export economy would collapse.

A relationship in which a minority used actual or threatened violence to coerce work from a majority of the population that they deemed to be culturally and racially inferior was bound to be marked by tension. Elites took it for granted that the Indian was lazy, stupid, dirty, and drunken: "The Indian is a pariah, stretched out in his hammock and drunk on *chichi* [corn beer]."[21] And they found it simplest to assume that he could be motivated only by threats and force. "Chucho" (mutt) they called him, and

[20] Burkitt, "Explorations," 45.

[21] *Diario de Centro América*, April 19, 1892.

foremen routinely slapped and hit workers or threw them in jail or bound them in stocks to punish them for real or imagined infractions. Landowners worked the Indians long hours, assigned them excessive tasks, and cheated them on the weight of coffee they picked or took advantage of the Indians' illiteracy to manipulate their debt records.[22] Small wonder that when Guatemala signed the 1923 Washington Convention that banned the physical coercion of labor, the planters were, briefly, worried.

Much of the abuse was structural and almost unconscious. Because the planters' racism led them to assume that Indians lived in filth, the plantations provided the temporary workers only the flimsiest of housing, often a open shed that crowded them together promiscuously but left the sides open and the inhabitants exposed to the elements. Food, provided by the employer for indebted workers, was routinely inadequate and drinking water polluted or contaminated with fertilizer or chemicals. If the men complained, the foreman told them to "eat shit."[23] Sanitary facilities were poor or nonexistent. Under such conditions, disease, including malaria, dysentery, and smallpox, was rampant, and workers traveling between the coast and the highlands spread sickness over wide areas.[24] When in the interest of increased efficiency or to protect their own health finca owners made improvements, such as digging latrines or vaccinating workers, they commonly nullified much of the possible benefit by failing to explain the changes to Indians they assumed too stupid to understand.

Although most seasonal and *mandamiento* labor was done by men, women worked too in the coffee economy. At first some were recruited for day labor from nearby villages, but as production expanded, women were more likely to become involved in coffee labor as members of male-dominated households. Wives and children commonly worked in the fields with the men to pay off what might be technically the man's debt but which in fact all involved treated as a family obligation. If the man died, employers sometimes sought to force the wife or children to assume responsibility for the outstanding balance.[25] This was against the law, but often family members acquiesced, because it offered them additional advances or,

[22] For a bitter comment on how the Indians were cheated, see *Diario de Centro América*, May 3, 1919.

[23] AGCA, B119.21.0.0 47749 350.

[24] An anthropologist working in the highland community of Chichicastenango during the 1930s reported that there was no disease in the village except malaria, brought by workers returned from the coast: Ruth Bunzel, *Chichicastenango: A Guatemalan Village* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1952), 143.

[25] E.g., AGCA, B119, 21.0.0 47751 119.

for *colonos*, because it guaranteed them continued access to land for subsistence plantings. In extreme cases, men "sold" wives or daughters to recruiters, taking the advance and leaving the unsuspecting or protesting women with the debt and the labor obligation. Some women, particularly single mothers or widows, contracted with the fincas on their own, to pick the harvest, winnow out bad beans as part of the cleaning process, or cook for the labor gangs. All suffered the threat or fact of sexual harassment, and all were subject to the pressures of labor debts; when it came to work, one woman lamented, we "have equal legal rights with men."[26]

It would be wrong, though, to imagine that indigenous women or men were in all cases simply passive victims. True, they rarely rebelled openly, whether against land incursions or labor demands or abuses by state officials. To do so, particularly after 1871 with the expansion of the state's repressive capacity, was to court destruction. Open defiance was likely to be drowned in blood. There were other, more effective ways to resist. Workers sometimes refused to leave the communities when called to the fincas or sought to delay their departure, and if pressed they could easily evade the *habilitadores*, whether by slipping away to an uninhabited area or fleeing across the border; labor pressures, one official admitted, "provoked a large number of Indians to emigrate to Mexico and British Honduras."[27] The *habilitador* usually had the law and the state on his side, but in the villages he was on his own. Most were themselves too socially marginal to provoke a fuss if they disappeared on a dark night, and both sides knew this, prompting negotiations more often than demands.[28] On the fincas, workers often engaged in foot dragging and sabotage or ran away, prompting owners on occasion to imprison whole gangs at night for fear they might escape.[29]

The most common and most efficient, if not the most dramatic, form of indigenous resistance was the petition.[30] In a tactic perfected during the colonial period, indigenous communities, families, and individuals rained protest documents on local officials, governors, and the president,

[26] AGCA B119.21.0.0 47811 106.

[27] Ministerio de Agricultura, *Agricultura-1902*, 41–42.

[28] For the massacre of a number of *habilitadores*, an event that did stir up a violent government response, see David McCreery, "Land, Labor, and Violence in Highland Guatemala: San Juan Ixcoy (Huehuetenango), 1890–1940," *The Americas* 45, no. 2 (Oct. 1988): 237–49.

[29] For the story of a particularly dramatic escape from a finca, see Juan de Dios Rosales, "Notes on Aguacatán," Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Middle American Cultural Anthropology, University of Chicago, no. 24.

[30] Many examples are available in the papers of the *jefes políticos* in the AGCA.

and repeatedly followed these up with personal visits, sometimes going as far as the capital. In these they rehearsed the abuses to which they said the fincas or recruiters or local authorities had subjected them and they begged for official intervention to give them justice. They were, of course, careful to acknowledge that the official to whom they addressed the complaint could not have known of these abuses and as much as they was a victim of corrupt subordinates and rapacious *finqueros*. The recipients of these petitions paid attention. They understood that, if pushed too far, the Indians might resort to violence, and perhaps violence on a massive scale, as they had in the Carrera uprising of the 1830s[31] and in the "War of the Castes" that raged off and on in southern Mexico for much of the century. Yet to appear too ready to give in threatened to compromise state and elite authority. Instead, these petitions generally initiated, or were part of, a negotiating process among the community, the workers, the employers, and the state. Several hundred years of colonial rule had given each side had a generally accurate idea of how much and how far they could push without these negotiations breaking down. Occasionally, misjudgments or misunderstandings occurred, but typically the petitions brought the seasonal workers the promise of a few cents more an hour pay or an order for an employer to end some particularly egregious abuse, together with the stern admonition that the Indians were to report at once to the fincas to fulfill their contracts. Generally, they did, though all were aware that these negotiations could, and probably would, begin again at some time in the not too distant future.

The effects of temporary wage labor on the workers and on their families and communities were complex and contradictory.[32] Men and women

[31] R. L. Woodward, *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821–1871* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993).

[32] A number of anthropological studies deal in part with the relationship between finca labor and life in the communities. Among these are Richard Appelbaum, *San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, Guatemala* (Guatemala: Cuadernos del Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca, no. 17, 1967); Bunzel, *Chichicastenango*; Robert Carmack, ed., *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Benjamin Colby and Pierre van den Berghe, *Ixil Country: A Plural Society in Highland Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); Ricardo Falla, *Quiché rebelde* (Guatemala City, 1978); Jackson Lincoln, "An Ethnographic Study of the Ixil Indians of the Guatemalan Highlands," Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Middle American Cultural Anthropology, University of Chicago, no. 1; Douglas Madigan, "Santiago Atitlán: A Socioeconomic History," Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1976; Maude Oakes, *The Two Crosses of Todos Santos: Survivals of Mayan Religious Rituals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); Jean Piel, *Sacabaja: Muerte y resurrección de un pueblo de Guatemala, 1500–1970* (Guatemala City, 1989); James Sexton, ed., *Son of*

who went to the coast were exposed to disease and physical and verbal abuse. They also faced the confusions of deculturation, though the latter was attenuated for temporary workers by the tendency to work in community-based gangs and because of the relatively short time they were gone from their villages. For some workers, the wages gave access to new consumer goods and helped create new "needs," while others accumulated savings and bought land or agricultural equipment. Most commonly, though, the wages and food rations from the fincas went simply to make up for subsistence shortfalls in families in the highland villages, as a growing population now pressed against declining resources. Temporary wage labor allowed the indigenous communities to support populations that would not otherwise have been possible, but it left them vulnerable to any downturn in employment.

Apart from simple subsistence, perhaps the most dramatic effect of the availability of wage labor for families was on generational relations. Young men no longer had to wait years or decades in strict subservience to their fathers in the hope of inheriting rights to land, a relationship traditionally fraught with vast tensions. They could now instead find alternative employment if they wished, or they might be able to accumulate enough money to buy their own land.

As for the communities, temporary wage work on the fincas tended to drain the highland economy of needed labor, sometimes at key moments in the cycles of planting or harvest. It also aggravated problems of disease and alcoholism and the tensions attendant on the increasing socioeconomic differentiation inherent in any newly monetarizing economy. On the positive side, the wages made money more available to the villages, and some of this went to reinforce community institutions such as *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) or to purchase or litigate land. Most important, it allowed the highlands to sustain a greater population than would have been possible based solely on locally available resources.

Mandamientos persisted in Guatemala until the years immediately after World War I. The collapse of coffee prices in the wake of the "Dance

Tecun Uman (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985); Waldeman Smith, *The Fiesta System and Economic Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Charles Wagley, *The Economics of a Guatemalan Village* (Menosha, Wis.: American Anthropological Association Memoir no. 58, 1941); Kay Warren, *The Symbolism of Subordination: Indian Identity in a Guatemalan Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978); and John Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

of the Millions," together with the effects of the worldwide influenza epidemic and fall of long-time dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera, provoked a rethinking of the country's labor systems in the early 1920s. A new regime did away with forced wage labor for agriculture,[33] which, in any event, most planters now equated with the extortions of the *jefes políticos*. And an unprecedented debate broke out in the newspapers over the possibilities of abolishing debts and instituting *trabajo libre*, "free labor."[34] These articles did not contemplate free labor in a capitalist sense but, rather, an arrangement in which wage labor would be obligatory for Indians, and now for poor ladinos, too, but in which there would be no advances or debts. Such a system potentially had advantages for all involved, but from the planters' perspective it presupposed a strong vagrancy law and a political regime able to enforce this, neither of which Guatemala had in the early 1920s. Planters and Indians alike were fundamentally conservative, and the state in these years was embroiled in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt at political democracy, so when coffee prices rebounded in 1924 the debate faded and the "custom" of debts reasserted itself.

Problems arose again only after 1929. Guatemala weathered the Depression rather better than did many other primary producers,[35] but a fall in income in the early 1930s prompted coffee planters to again question labor costs and to look for ways to reduce them. Censuses in the 1920s made employers and the state aware of increases in the indigenous population, opening the possibility of an end to labor shortages. After a generation of work in the wage economy, many of Guatemala's Indians, as individuals and as communities, had acquired needs that only cash could satisfy. In 1931–32, they were knocking at the doors of the fincas, only to find no work available. But when reforms came, they were only a half-step. In May of 1934, the dictator General Jorge Ubico ended labor debts and instituted *trabajo libre*, as outlined in the debates of the early 1920s: rural men, Indians and ladinos alike, were free to contract their work as they wished, but those who could not prove that they had access to relatively large amounts of land or who did not practice an exempted profession

[33] Evidence for the end of agricultural *mandamientos* is indirect, as in theory they had been illegal since the 1894 labor law, and the government often denied that they existed; see McCreery, *Rural Guatemala*, 302.

[34] See, esp. the pages of the *Imparcial* (Guatemala City), Guatemala's first modern newspaper.

[35] Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *Political Economy of Central America since 1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), chaps. 3 and 4.

or trade were required to work for wages on an export plantation for at least 100 to 150 days a year.[36]

The state backed this up with a tough new vagrancy law,[37] enforced by obligatory identity cards and work records and by police checkpoints and sweeps through the countryside. Despite the law, however, Indians continued to refuse to go to the fincas without advances. The state gave in on this but limited these to what could be worked off in a few months and would not enforce long-term labor debts. The indigenous population welcomed the changes, not the least because they now required that non-Indians as well as Indians work. They valued work and the new law seemed fairer: "When Ubico entered the government, there was a change because he created an article in the constitution which made work sacred."[38] Sales of work papers soon demonstrated an emerging balance between the labor requirements of the export economy and those Indians and ladinos with so little land that they had to seek wage labor.

If they accepted the new law as an improvement over the old one, the Indians nevertheless continued to resist coerced labor. Many hid out and tried to avoid situations where they could be forced to produce their work records: "The survivors were like lizards hidden among the rock, only raising their heads to spy the danger that came in search of more workers."[39] Others bribed local officials to certify land or a profession they did not have or bought falsified papers. Employers made deals to pay the men less than the going wage but to record in their books a greater number of days than they had actually worked. Authorities hoped that the new law would induce emigrants that had taken refuge in Mexico and British Honduras to return, but few did. Those accused of vagrancy sometimes mounted elaborate and successful defenses, and the courts went to surprising lengths to help defendants obtain evidence that might validate their claims.[40]

The new laws brought changes to the communities. One effect was to reverse a half-century trend of ladinos migrating to western highland towns, to exploit recruiting and commercial opportunities stimulated by the rise in available cash. The need for *habilitadores* declined, and *contratistas*, dependent on their indebted clientele, were wiped out. Into

[36] Rosendo Mendez, *Leyes vigentes de agricultura* (Guatemala City, 1937), 214–15.

[37] Ibid., 244–47.

[38] Warren, *Symbolism*, 149.

[39] From an unpublished manuscript made available to the author by Prof. Ben Paul.

[40] See the many cases in the Archivo de los Tribunales, presently in the AGCA.

the place of departing ladinos stepped individuals from among the better-off segment of the indigenous population, taking over labor recruiting, managing small shops and trades, and taking advantage of the government's aggressive road-building campaign to set up truck and bus lines.[41] With the fall-off in advances and the growing impoverishment of much of the population, the profits from these activities were less than they had been but were still greater than those available in subsistence agriculture or barter trade, and they too offered exemption from the vagrancy law. The effect was, on the one hand, to "re-Indianize" the local economy in many towns while, at the same time, hastening socioeconomic differentiation among the indigenous population and heightening the possibilities of the conflict such differentiation entailed.

Only with the Revolution of 1944 did elites and the state finally abandon the legal coercion of labor. Indeed, this was one of the first topics the new government took up. The old arguments about the backwardness and laziness of the Indians and their supposed unwillingness to work for wages resurfaced, but times had changed.[42] For one thing, it was now painfully obvious that the population of the western highlands and the Alta Verapaz was rapidly running out of resources. The census of 1950 confirmed this: Almost half of all agriculturalists in the country cultivated two manzanas (one manzana equals approximately 1.7 acres) or less of land, and by the end of the decade estimates were that only 20 to 30 percent of the Indians in the western highlands had access to enough land to support their families.[43]

The young revolutionaries were committed to converting Guatemala to a modern capitalist economy, including free labor, but at a measured pace. They abolished the vagrancy law as a vehicle for labor recruitment[44] but hesitated at further reforms that might affect exports or alienate powerful agriculturally based elites. For example, the government approved unions for urban workers but for not those in the countryside. The hope instead was that land reform would solve rural problems. A first step was a law requiring the rental of unused land. Then in 1952, the new Arbenz regime enacted Decree 900, one of the most sweeping land reforms in the history of Latin America, though one still well within the confines of a capitalist

[41] For a more recent, if unsuccessful, example of such entrepreneurship, see Sexton, ed., *Son of Tecun Uman*.

[42] See, e.g., *El Imparcial*, May 2, 1945.

[43] Appelbaum, *San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán*, 18.

[44] Augusto Zelaya Gil and Manuel Antonio Lucerno, eds., *Resumen de leyes de la República, clasificados y anotados por secretarías* (Guatemala City, 1955), 255.

system. By June of 1954, some 100,000 families had received 750,000 acres as community or individual property, and more land was in the process of being expropriated.[45] The government promised as well credit, roads, and agricultural extension services to make the reform effective. Caught in Cold War tensions, however, the revolution collapsed in the face of an exile invasion backed by the United States and an army coup. White terror rolled back land reform and abolished most labor rights.

The economic conditions evident by 1950 accelerated in the next decades and inequalities accentuated. Population grew almost exponentially, rising from 2.8 million in 1950 to 8.5 in the mid-1980s, so that per capita access to land continued to decline. Under pressure to do something about land shortages, the postrevolutionary governments promoted colonization schemes that settled Indians in the largely uninhabited, and isolated, northern parts of the country. But when in the 1970s it appeared that some of this area might hold important oil reserves, the army moved it and evicted the settlers, adding to the numbers of landless and unemployed seeking work.[46] Anthropologists researching in the western highlands reported that far from having to forcibly recruit workers, it was now sufficient to park a truck in the village plaza and make an announcement over the local radio station to have all the seasonal workers a finca needed.[47] But extralegal coercion had not disappeared, particularly on the export properties where armed guards tried to prevent labor organizing and strikes.

In the cities and towns, death squads murdered hundreds of union leaders and political activists during the 1960s and 1970s.[48] By the late 1970s tensions had become unbearable and strikes erupted in urban areas and on the rural estates, and leftist guerrillas, repressed in the 1960s, reappeared in the western highlands. Guatemala exploded into violence and descended into the horrors of civil war. Fighting had subsided inconclusively by the mid-1980s, but the repression of strikes and labor organizing continued, giving Guatemala one of the worst labor, or simply human, rights record in the hemisphere. Tens of thousands of those displaced by

[45] Jim Handy, *Revolution in the Countryside: Rural Conflict and Agrarian Reform in Guatemala, 1944–1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 94–95.

[46] On violence in the northern settlement areas, see Ricardo Falla, *Massacres in the Jungle: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975–1982* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994).

[47] Reported to the author by Prof. John Watanabe.

[48] On political violence in Guatemala, see Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991). On the recent situation, see the www.amnesty-usa.org.

the war or the destruction of the highland economy scrambled for survival in the urban "informal sector" or sought work on the coastal coffee, sugar cane, and cotton plantations. Free labor had come to Guatemala.

Coffee is perhaps unique among tropical export commodities in supporting a wide variety of production schemes, from large slave-based plantations to family farms, all of which can be made to be profitable. If in the late nineteenth century Brazil produced enormous quantities of coffee and dominated the market and Costa Ricans found a niche for themselves with a small but high quality output, Guatemala's experience fell somewhere in between. By the turn of the century, the country was the world's fourth largest coffee exporter, but its product was so highly regarded in Europe that much of it was marketed under the names of individual fincas. This ability to combine relatively large-scale production while maintaining high quality was possible because of the availability of tens of thousands of Indians workers, coerced into coffee labor by state power, "custom," and, increasingly after 1930, "needs." This was low-cost but not cheap labor; ranked by productivity Guatemala in the 1910s and '20s fell well behind its neighbors. But the labor was available and did allow Guatemala's elites to export large quantities of high-quality coffee that commanded premium prices on world markets. The process also impoverished the indigenous population and threatened to destroy a centuries-old culture.