



Costa Rica Before Coffee: Society and Economy on the Eve of the Export Boom

Lowell Gudmundson

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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 they 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 quality; 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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