

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Eighth Latin American Labor History Conference

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The Eighth Latin American Labor History Conference, held on 19–20 April 1991 was generously sponsored by the Program in Latin American Studies, the departments of Afro-American Studies, Anthropology, and History, and the Dean of Students Office of Princeton University.

In “Nicaraguan Indian Communities, Rural Proletarianization, and the Myth of the Nicaraguan Ladino (1880–1960),” Jeffrey Gould (Indiana University) challenged the ideological assumption—shared across the political spectrum—that “the development of agrarian capitalism in Nicaragua led to the elimination of Indian communal land, the loss of cultural signs, and the creation of a non-Indian rural proletariat.” In a sensitive use of oral history, he also demonstrated the persistence of a notion of being “indigenas” or “nativos” versus the outsiders in their midst among a group of ladino peasants in Yucul who had apparently totally lost their Indian identities.

Commenting on Gould, Peter Winn (Tufts University) emphasized the plasticity of ethnicity as a social construct, and criticized the anthropologists’ checklist approach to defining Indian identity. There are many ways of answering the question of who is Indian. In some cases, the construction of identity focuses on Indian land holding, even among those who no longer speak an indigenous language. In other cases, the key is found in the preservation of language despite loss of land. And in still other cases, Indian identity may persist without land or language. Moreover, the fluidity of definition also depends on who is asking the question and why. There are times, Winn reminded the audience, when one can choose to be or not to be an Indian—and other times when it is unavoidable.

Mary Roldan (Amherst College) presented a provocative paper titled “Purifying the Factory, Demonizing the Public Service Sector: The Role of Ethnic and Cultural Differences in Determining Perceptions of Working-Class Militancy in Antioquia, Colombia.” The paper demonstrated the dichotomization of elite discourse between loyal industrial workers in Medellín itself and the demonized work forces that labored in the railroads, mines, oil fields, and transportation on the periphery of the region, who were viewed as “pathologically rebellious and violent peoples who endangered Antioqueño culture, morals, ‘race’ (raza), and stability.”

Roldan’s crisply written “tale of elite obsessions and insecurities writ onto the small and large details of Colombia’s laboring folk,” Michael Jimenez (Princeton

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University) suggested, may offer a new way of rethinking the origin of the Colombian violence of the late 1940s. Having successfully combined patriarchy, religion, and economic incentives to create a largely quiescent industrial labor force in the urban core, the region's elites were confronted on the frontier with a racially mixed population, employed in diverse occupations, and largely untouched by the traditional mechanism of social control through family, church, and state. The elites turned to the Army and "death squads," presaging the massive violence of the years that followed.

Debate focused on the relationship between racial and cultural dimensions of the Antioqueño self-identity. Tiffany Patterson (Spellman College) was particularly drawn to the question of the cultural construction of racial ideology—that is, the racialization, in certain places in specific historical circumstances, of culture.

In a wide-ranging comment on the session as a whole, Emília Viotti da Costa (Yale University) criticized the theoretical confusion created by a primordial vision of ethnicity and race as a legacy of the past. Citing the work of John Comaroff ("Of Totemism and Ethnicity: Consciousness, Practice, and the Signs of Inequality," *Ethnos* [1987]), she argued that we must historicize our understanding of class, ethnicity, and gender as changing, constantly reinvented phenomena. Moreover, da Costa emphasized that identities are multiple and competitive, not static or dichotomous. In this sense, race or ethnicity is never the same for men as for women. And class, contrary to earlier visions, does not eliminate racial and ethnic identities, although it may speak through such identities with important consequences for collective action.

In "Social Control and Conflictive Behavior: The Transition from Slavery to Free Labor in Guayama, Puerto Rico," Luis A. Figueroa (University of Connecticut) used civil and criminal records to explore the broader implications of emancipation in Puerto Rico's third largest slave holding municipio. While examining planter efforts to restrict the mobility of freed men, Figueroa paid special attention to their efforts to avoid social, moral, and racial turmoil by establishing clear norms of proper behavior for ex-slaves. The examples chosen were rich and suggestive, ranging from on-the-job disputes to gambling, African "bailes de bombas," and the staging of local festivals.

Figueroa's paper, Barbara Weinstein (SUNY, Stony Brook) suggested, differs radically from the more mechanistic models of planter behavior in the post-emancipation era. Figueroa demonstrates, she went on, "that social control mechanisms reflected not only calculations of labor needs but also elite anxiety to preserve social and racial hierarchies." While drawing on comparisons with Brazil, Cuba, and the United States, Weinstein commented at length on a court case discussed in the paper where an overseer was tried for beating an ex-slave who had made a joke at his expense. She found it significant that three libertos were willing to testify on the ex-slave's behalf—suggesting considerable solidarity and relative lack of fear—and that the overseer was eventually convicted. Seconding this point, Jiminez emphasized that emancipation is not just an issue of labor

but of civic space, which necessarily brought with it new notions of rights and citizenship.

In a joint paper written with Gilbert Joseph (University of North Carolina), Alan Wells (Bowdoin College) provided a richly detailed and conceptually well-grounded study of “The Potential for and Limits of Resistance on Yucatan’s Henequen Estates (1880–1915).” Based on research in legal records, the paper sought to recast prevailing notions regarding the inability of resident peons on the henequen plantations to resist their masters. While detailing the structural impediments that restricted their potential for self-generated insurrection compared to *comuneros*, the paper explored in remarkable detail the very different, quieter, and daily varieties of resistance “eminently suited to a highly controlled, socially heterogeneous plantation milieu.” Wells and Joseph also offered some interesting reflections about the ambiguities of alcohol as a form of resistance and escape that was simultaneously a valuable mechanism for social control by planters.

In his comments, Cliff Welch (Grand Valley State University) praised the paper for its ability to link the upheaval and revolt among henequen workers during the Mexican Revolution with a hitherto unknown history of routine and everyday resistance. The paper also provided some evidence that the state and the judiciary played, at times, an ambivalent role meriting further exploration. Finally, Welch raised an issue—much debated in the ensuing discussion—as to whether or not suicide among the Mayan-speaking peons should be considered a form of resistance or not—a question raising issues of culture and ethnicity not discussed in the paper.

Steven J. Hirsch’s paper, “Urban Workers in Peru and the Limits of Aprista Hegemony, 1931–1948,” presented a vigorous attack on the traditional thesis that the populist APRA party and its leader Haya de la Torre “controlled” the Peruvian labor movement. Hirsch provided multiple examples where Limeño workers—especially in the textile workers’ union—resolutely pursued their own class interests even when they conflicted with party policy and the wishes of the party’s often insensitive middle class leadership.

In his comments, John D. French praised Hirsch’s paper for asking “in what ways and to what extent did labor influence the political policies and trajectories” of APRA. Reviewing APRA’s place within the historiography on populism, French emphasized that APRA, compared to Vargas and Perón, had received disproportionate scholarly attention because of the party’s willingness—along with the MNR of Bolivia and the AD of Venezuela—to align itself with the U.S. during the Cold War era. In an aside, French suggested the Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, “far from being the negation of populism, was in fact the culmination of Latin American populism: a synthesis of earlier movements that transformed what had been merely an anti-capitalist potential within populism into a reality.”

In the discussion that followed, political scientists Peter Ranis and Rosario Espinal cautioned against the danger of simply inverting our traditional image of co-optation or manipulation of workers by populist politicians. French responded

that concepts such as domination/manipulation/co-optation should be replaced by the more dynamic idea of an alliance of workers and populists whose terms shift over time. Daniel James (Yale University) also remarked that one must distinguish clearly between a populist discourse and political project developed from a position of state power, like Perón's, and the case of APRA, which never achieved such a position of power.

In " 'Father of the Poor' or 'Mother of the Rich'? : Work Identities and Politics in the Estate Novo," Joel Wolfe (Williams College) argued that the negative impact of the Vargas regime's corporatist politics of co-optation and repression were most strongly felt by the industrial working class. As linchpins of this repressive structure, Wolfe argued, trade unions were turned into "de facto instruments of the state," consciously rejected by industrial workers who relied instead on informal grass-roots organization and direct appeals to Vargas. Analyzing workers' letters to Vargas, he found a "complex interplay between official rhetoric and those it was aimed at" that demonstrated that "neither rural origins nor regime propaganda had obscured the consciousness of these workers."

Welcoming Wolfe's paper as part of a growing body of work on getulista populism, Daniel James was particularly struck by Wolfe's use of the letters individual workers wrote to the government. Yet James remained unconvinced by Wolfe's portrayal of a continuity of working-class militancy, activism, and class consciousness dating back to the First Republic. The rhetoric and phraseology of the letters, James pointed out, could equally well be used "to paint an opposite picture of an atomized working class, a co-opted, manipulated mass putting its trust in the paternalistic dictator." Wolfe, he suggested, should pay greater attention to the complexity and ambiguity of working-class responses to Vargas and to the emergence of a new culture and consciousness of rights among workers in the 1940s. "An awareness of the continued harshness of conditions," he went on, "could go hand in hand with a genuine belief in Vargas, and a view of the state as a sphere where social justice and equality could be realized."

American Unionists Meet with the French Confédération Générale du Travail

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In December 1947, in the midst of a powerful strike wave in France, a group of leaders of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) left the organization to form an anti-communist labor federation, Force Ouvrière (FO). The new group was assisted by AFL and CIO representatives in Europe. The American labor