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Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua
(review)

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Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Volume 38, Number 1, Summer 2007,
pp. 164-165 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press



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that large landowners also fought state intervention and that a lack of trained surveyors and financing hindered land division.

Under the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, Mexico institutionalized and fortified its mapping efforts through the Comisión Geográfico-Exploradora, which came under the jurisdiction of the War Ministry by 1881. Whether due to the military effort to record multiple local place names for counter-insurgency purposes, to the post-1890s emphasis on property division, or to the post-1911 revolutionary land reform, scientific maps, rather than titles and local memory, became the authoritative texts over which people had to struggle.

The epilogue brings the narrative to the 1990s when Mexico's President Carlos Salinas reformed the sacred Article 27 of the revolutionary Mexican Constitution, permitting communal *ejido* lands to be rented, privatized, and sold. Though at first glance, this development might appear to signal the state's withdrawal from managing land, the author notes that it created a mammoth state bureaucracy to oversee surveying, certification, and titling. The state, its surveyors, and their maps emerge as the winners in this history. However, this book is a reminder that in spite of constant state efforts to fix and make permanent the landscape, people keep moving, changing place names, and inventing new uses of space, remaining forever one step ahead of the state surveyor.

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Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua. By Elizabeth Dore (Durham, Duke University Press, 2006) 252 pp. \$74.95 cloth \$21.95 paper

The academic literature about changes to Latin American rural society caused by the spread of coffee cultivation during the late nineteenth century is extensive. But Dore's work on the municipality of Diriomo in the Granada district of Nicaragua makes it clear that much remains to be learned about this period.

Informed by interesting theoretical and conceptual perspectives, and using a variety of sources, Dore traces the history of Diriomo in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concentrating on the period after 1870. Her most important sources are municipal archives, through which she has sifted painstakingly. Dore augments them with oral history, using conversations with residents both to deepen the account contained in the archives and to suggest alternative understandings of the events described. She explores the changes in Diriomo through an analysis of arguments about the commons, private property, and agrarian capitalism—drawing from the work of Polanyi and Burns; gender, patri-

archy, and debt bondage—using arguments derived from Stern and Knight; and ethnicity—gleaning insights from Adams and Gould.¹

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, indigenous elites in the community acted with regional elites and national governments to title land and to extinguish common property rights in the municipality. Dore puts this process in the context of “private property revolutions” elsewhere and discusses the extent to which the titling of private property and the spread of coffee cultivation led to agrarian capitalism. In Dore’s analysis, this issue is tied up with questions of labor. The continuation of a form of debt peonage leads Dore to argue that Diriomo was not in transition to a “free labour” regime; nor did the spread of coffee cultivation lead to the dominance of capitalist relations of production in the municipality.

Debt peonage was linked to the continuing importance of patronage and patriarchy. Local elites used continuing relations of patriarchy to cement their elite positions and to tie labor to their estates. This “patriarchy from above” connected to a “patriarchy from below” that reinforced the role of the male head of the peasant household and helped bind peasants to the coffee regime. Nonetheless, one of Dore’s central arguments is that private property enabled women to title land in their own names, freeing them from legal dependence on a head of household for access to land. Unfortunately, most of the evidence that Dore is able to bring to bear on this issue consists of census records; the argument remains suggestive but unconvincing.

Dore is more persuasive in discussing ethnicity. She argues that the effective termination of communal lands in the second half of the century removed the most important difference between indigenous and nonindigenous residents. Thus, Diriomenos no longer described themselves as indigenous. Dore also ties her arguments about Diriomo’s history to an understanding of the mistakes made in the Sandinista agrarian reform of the 1990s.

Those trying to understand agrarian change and rural society in Latin America, and elsewhere, can find much that is informative and useful in this marvelous book.

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1 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York, 1944; repr. Boston, 1957); E. Bradford Burns, *Patriarch and Folk: The Emergence of Nicaragua, 1789–1858* (New York, 1991); Steve Stern, *The Secret History of Gender* (Chapel Hill, 1975); Alan Knight, “Debt Bondage in Latin America,” in Leonie Archer (ed.), *Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour* (London, 1988), 102–117; *idem*, “Mexican Peonage: What it Was and Why Was It?” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, XVIII (1986), 41–74; Richard Adams, “Ethnic Images and Strategies in 1944,” in Carol Smith (ed.), *Guatemalan Indians and the State* (Austin, 1990), 13–34; Jeffrey Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880–1965* (Durham, 1998).