

Andrés León Araya.
The Coup and the Palm Trees:
Agrarian Conflict and Political Power
in Honduras

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In *The Coup and the Palm Trees*, anthropologist Andrés León Araya examines the dialectical relationship between state formation and agrarian politics in Honduras. He develops this analysis through a meticulous account of land reform policies and legislation in the post-World War II period. Ultimately, agrarian reform and the counter-reform that followed in the 1990s facilitated the transformation of so-called ‘unproductive’ lands along the country’s fertile Caribbean coast into a staging ground for experiments in neoliberal capitalism. Today the Bajo Aguán valley, a fertile plain along the north-central coast, is covered by vast expanses of oil palm plantations – a testament to this longer history.

León Araya demonstrates how the Caribbean coast of Honduras, often viewed as a peripheral geography, is an essential site from which to understand key political conjunctures in the country’s history, including the 2009 coup against Honduran president Manuel Zelaya Rosales. For many scholars of Latin America, the coup marked not only a rupture in democratic governance but also, perhaps more seriously, a threat to the state form itself. León Araya pushes back against this interpretation and dominant portrayals of Honduras as a ‘failed state’, which he contends

elide more complicated political and social dynamics in the country. Violence, uneven geographical development and dispossession are not aberrations of the state form; rather, he argues, they are central state-making practices that created the conditions of possibility for agrarian extractivism to take hold historically and to endure into the present.

The Coup and the Palm Trees is split into two sections. Part One lays out what he calls the 'pre-history of neoliberalism'. Building on the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, León Araya demonstrates how the Honduran elite secured class domination over agrarian production and the state through a 'passive revolution'. This process entailed small concessions and reforms meant to appease more radical segments of the labouring classes, including organised peasant groups, as a means of advancing modernisation projects. Part Two brings us centrally into the contemporary moment, tracing how this earlier history of agrarian reform is tethered to the elite power grab in 2009 and the violence that ensued. Organised chronologically, the book insists on the centrality of land – its meaning, use and history – to processes of state formation.

The book opens with the 2009 coup and then weaves together the historical context that led to the coup and the subsequent deepening of 'state-narco relations'. He shows how militarisation and democratic state formation are closely intertwined throughout the twentieth century, which is of course inextricable from Cold War geopolitics and US anti-communist military operations in the region. Land redistribution policies represented a significant threat to capitalist enterprise and US corporate domination over the agrarian sector. However, León Araya rejects conventional accounts of Honduras as a passive receptor for US imperialism, a perspective he shares with other leading scholars of Honduras, including historian Suyapa Portillo. Working class peoples – landless peasants and smallholders – have been agents of change and radical political projects that not only contest elite power but propose important alternatives to the dominant developmentalist agenda.

León Araya argues that 'empty spaces', or land on the peripheries of the state and political power, are in fact vital to the state's political-economic prospects within the global economy. In the Bajo Aguán valley, agrarian reform policies were used to mollify peasant movements in the 1970s while at the same time converting peasants into productive citizens and central agents of the country's economic development. Chapter two details how the making of plantation landscapes in the

Bajo Aguán was crucially bound to the making of peasant workers. This dual process transformed Honduras into one of the top African oil palm producers in Latin America. Thus, taming the land to facilitate the growth of the palm oil industry was tightly tied to the taming of the unruly and unproductive peasant subjects targeted by these land reform policies.

Land, labour and struggles over the control of land rents are important drivers of social and political life at the national and regional scales, dynamics that he shows unfold along gendered lines. To understand the gendered dimensions of these struggles, he draws on oral histories and feminist theories of social reproduction. While men held formal leadership positions within peasant cooperatives and made most decisions over the commercial use and sale of land, women did much of the work needed to sustain the family and community. León Araya is among a small cohort of Central Americanists who are rescuing histories of working class, Indigenous and Black popular mobilisation in the region from oblivion, while also bringing ethnographic attention to the specific plight of landless peasants and their livelihood struggles in the face of a brutal state apparatus. Importantly, his work helps to clarify how and why outmigration from Honduras has spiked in recent years, without falling into standard narratives of state failure.

Beginning early in the twentieth century with the rapid expansion of foreign-owned banana plantations and subsequently with the rise of the palm oil industry, León Araya highlights the violence and dispossession upon which economic value within the agricultural sector is produced, and how these processes are indeed central to the formation of the Honduran state. These dynamics were on dramatic display after the 2009 coup when dozens of peasants from the Bajo Aguán were murdered and imprisoned for their activism. Like Garifuna, Lenca and other Indigenous land activists across the country, peasant groups continue to confront state violence and clamour for their right for a better future.

The Coup and Palm Trees offers a powerful historical and ethnographic account of the agrarian reform and counterreform in Honduras, deepening our understanding of state formation in the region as well as the various forms of contestation and struggle waged by peasants to 'stake a claim on the landscapes and value that they produced in the form of the oil palm plantation economy' (p. 193). This bottom-up

perspective raises additional questions regarding how the struggles advanced by peasant groups in the Aguán articulate with the struggles of Indigenous and Black communities along the coast. If the agrarian reform and counter-reform is a state-making project, then the territorial claims of Indigenous and Black peoples pose real threats to the state's developmentalist agenda. I suspect the interplay between these distinctly situated struggles will capture the attention of future researchers. León Araya's book is of broad relevance to historians, anthropologists and geographers of the region, and to scholars of peasant mobilisation and land.

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