



## REVIEW ESSAY: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN LATIN AMERICAN-US RELATIONS

*Banana Cowboys: The United Fruit Company and the Culture of Corporate Colonialism.* By James W. Martin. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2018, p. 252, \$65.00.

*The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files.* By Marc Becker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, p. 322, \$27.95.

*Plan Colombia: U.S. Ally Atrocities and Community Activism.* By John Lindsay-Poland. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 293, \$27.95.

Since the end of the international Cold War, scholarship on U.S.-Latin American relations has not just flourished but developed in myriad ways. While Stephen Rabe notes how the literature on inter-American relations has always been multifaceted and multiarchival, the bureaucracy of the U.S. government's declassification process and the limitations in accessing sensitive documents blocked off by those linked to military regimes hindered more thorough investigations despite historians' best efforts.<sup>1</sup> Even when identifying important trends surrounding the construction and implementation of U.S. policy toward Latin America, Mark Gilderhus identified artificial barriers related to this dilemma.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, the Cold War's official end and the gradual thaw of those regimes, in spite of the seemingly never-ending strained relations with Cuba, quickly offered small caveats. Diplomatic historians presented those once denoted as "puppets" or passive victims of the U.S. government as more adept manipulators of domestic sentiments and international politics.<sup>3</sup> Returning to familiar corporate entities and hemispheric encounters, historians and anthropologists delved deeper into the nuances of U.S. imperialism and Latin American postcolonialism thanks to postmodernism and the cultural turn.<sup>4</sup> Of course, there lingered questions regarding Latin America's place within Cold War studies and the post-Cold War era.<sup>5</sup> However, the historiographical impetus proceeded forward, culminating in even more revelations about the violence and insurgency that defined Latin America for the past years, examinations into the role and impact of U.S.-based resources and policies, and debates over what some have termed Latin America's own Cold War.<sup>6</sup> The three books reviewed here all speak to this enduring energy in the scholarship on U.S.-Latin American relations.

James W. Martin's *Banana Cowboys* centers upon the United Fruit Company (UFCO), a popular lens through which diplomatic historians, anthropologists, and more have investigated the extension of U.S. influence

and culture into Latin America.<sup>7</sup> Whereas most of the literature has focused upon how the transnational entity reshaped politics and labor abroad, Martin centers his perspective on how the company dealt with the white laborers it transplanted from the United States into its colonial enclaves abroad. The UFCO saw the world through a gendered construction of white supremacy that expected its Anglo-Saxon managers to dominate both non-white laborers and a metaphorical “banana frontier” of wilderness and indigenous peoples (128). Initially, management believed exporting this vision of race relations to its territories in Latin America would keep its white and non-white workers separated from one another, an international division of labor complementing other Gilded Age business practices of scientific management, vertical integration, and more. However, this racist masculinity turned out to be more fragile than expected as tropical diseases, a harsh terrain, and overbearing managers weakened those white laborers, resulting in drastically low retention and a weakened labor force.

In contrast to studies inadvertently portraying the UFCO as a single or monolithic extension of U.S. culture and empire, Martin finds that laborers complained about those policies and working conditions, epitomized in labor strikes in 1909 and 1910. As a result, officials created a new form of corporate welfarism in banana zones designed to attract and appease white workers. Its personnel blended science and medicine by providing residential housing, social facilities, and improved infrastructure. At the heart of these programs remained that racial hierarchy, with expatriates enduring and conquering the tropical environment while relying on black servants, non-white workers, and leisurely sports to further unite its white laborers. Even as the UFCO launched its notable scientific and medical projects into Latin America, these too remained heavily racialized and designed to discipline and condition laborers with a moral hygiene of whiteness that stood against what its personnel condemned as the immorality and unsanitary living conditions of local communities of color, as when blaming neighboring populations for the high rate of syphilis among white workers. In its project of U.S. culture into Latin America, this corporate colonialism became the foundation for a mythology of “banana cowboys,” Anglo-Saxon men virile and masculine enough to civilize the tropical wilderness found in romanticized drawings of cowboys and poems about fishing in official newsletters and workers’ letters (138).

Ultimately, the author adds to the cultural turn in U.S.-Latin American relations scholarship by revealing that the UFCO blended race, medicine, and science into its corporate colonialism and welfare policies in order to retain its white managers, control non-white workers, and discipline the tropical environment. In illuminating management’s relationship with its white workers, Martin shows that even one of the most powerful vehicles of U.S. culture had difficulties with those it expected to be its champions. While some might suggest the author could have incorporated

more sources from UFCO officials in accessible depositories at the Harvard Business School or the Massachusetts Historical Society, these likely would have shown managers reaffirming those projections of race and masculinity into Latin America. Overall, Martin succeeds in interweaving the company's publications with a handful of smaller collections from UFCO workers, most notably Everett Brown, who went abroad. This colonialist ideology even appeared in company-sponsored archaeological digs in Guatemala and Honduras, where its science legitimated demands for further exploration into Latin America, quite crucial considering the UFCO would later tap into these expeditions and mythologies to convince many in and out of power in the United States and elsewhere that it was a benevolent arbiter of an American way of life. Still, perusing prominent newspapers in Guatemala, Costa Rica, and elsewhere might have added to this study. After all, the company's leisure culture intersected with a boom in social clubs and festive gatherings within Latin America. Delving a bit deeper into this and other cultural projects might have shed further light upon how the interests of the corporation's white labor force intersected with those of the local elite, undergirding the author's focus on UFCO workers.

In *The FBI in Latin America*, Marc Becker expertly uses files from the Federal Bureau of Information (FBI) on Ecuador during the early 1940s to better identify how U.S.-Latin American relations altered with the onset of the international Cold War. Part of the book is its examination of the nuances behind the FBI's surveillance and intelligence gathering. Of course, the author touches upon the expected issues and trends, including bureaucratic competition between J. Edgar Hoover and other departments abroad, how economic concerns repeatedly overshadowed fears of either fascist or communist penetration, and the regular incompetence of agents and their training. What Becker best highlights, though, is how the staff in Ecuador focused their attention on communism in the nation while repeating exaggerated claims of such influence. Despite acknowledging the country's poverty and inequality, agents forwarded incomplete and inaccurate claims originating from local elites and informants. This scattershot wartime data collection is most noticeable when the author finds the FBI mostly monitored "Men of European descent" while "ignor[ing] women, Indigenous peoples, and Afro-Ecuadorians, even when they made significant political contributions" (70). This was reflective of the agents' own stereotypes and lack of knowledge concerning domestic politics, exemplified in their overlooking four women who were pivotal organizers of the Partido Comunista del Ecuador (PCE) and the indigenous leaders spearheading gatherings of anti-fascist movements which the FBI feared could become dominated by communists. At one point repeatedly honing in on how US officials' concerns for hemispheric stability and raw materials in the last moments of the Second World War overshadowed domestic political considerations during the 1944 Glorious May Revolution, Becker

simultaneously teases out key diplomatic fractures between State Department officials recognizing many leftists as potential allies and Hoover's insistence on rooting out any and all communist activities.

The other part of the book centers upon Becker's adroitly identifying what FBI sources reveal about those leftist political organizations and reform movements. In light of how collections and sources on the PCE and other groups in Ecuador have been lost or destroyed, the author presents the products of this foreign surveillance as useful, though sometimes incomplete or inaccurate. Because of his mastery of Ecuadorian history, Becker sheds light on local dynamics not readily available elsewhere, as when finding the local challenges keeping labor activists from hosting a massive congress in early 1943 or between socialists and communists during the La Gloriosa. Likewise, his blending of FBI files with a scattering of British reports finds the plethora of disagreements and debates that surrounded the PCE's decisions and policies into 1946 during José María Velasco Ibarra's coup.

Becker's work speaks to the growing body of literature on Latin America's Cold War by highlighting the role of U.S. resources in contributing to Ecuador's own debates between leftist reformers and conservative reactionaries from the Second World War into the international Cold War's early escalation. He touches upon the U.S. government's attempts to prevent US Vice President Henry Wallace from meeting with leftist organizations in 1943 and to hinder contacts between Ecuador's labor activists and Mexican communist Vicente Lombardo Toledano, whom the FBI feared was funneling resources from the Soviet Union, to labor leader Pedro Saad. As Becker points out, the FBI's departure from the country did not end U.S.-backed surveillance of leftists; rather, the State Department inherited this bureaucratic apparatus with all its exaggerations and paranoia, molding U.S.-Latin American relations in these formative Cold War years. Digging into related materials at the Franklin D. Roosevelt or Harry S. Truman Presidential Libraries would have further reinforced this crucial claim by moving beyond the U.S. Embassy and into the worldviews and decision-making inside the White House itself, but the book overall realizes its dual purpose.

Finally, John Lindsay-Poland's *Plan Colombia* opens with Colombian soldiers and paramilitaries murdering the families and loved ones of Luis Eduardo Guerra and Alfonso Bolívar Tuberquia. Such wrenching case studies never end as the author traces the government-sanctioned and U.S.-financed violence that continued beyond the Cold War. For the book's first half, Lindsay-Poland jumps back and forth between events in Urabá in Antioquia and the larger dynamics of U.S.-Colombian relations, purposefully linking the intimate history of one local community to the broader policy-making happening throughout the Western Hemisphere. In one chapter, he provides the opening overview of Plan Colombia and U.S.-Colombian ties from the Korean War into the turn of the century.

In the next chapter, he gives a glimpse into how the Colombian military and U.S. multinational corporations, including Chiquita and Coca-Cola, sponsored paramilitaries who targeted neutral peasant cooperatives and civilians. This pattern, both of chapter organization and of historical and continuous state-sanctioned terror, continues through what was the War on Drugs and into what is now the War on Terror.

What makes Lindsay-Poland's book truly exceptional is the way he weaves a history of a massive counternarcotic-turned-counterterrorist program the size of Plan Colombia with a plethora of accounts from the victims of extralegal paramilitary and legal military violence, the human rights activists trying to mediate and bear witness, Colombian soldiers, U.S. military advisers, and the author's own time in the country. In so doing, Lindsay-Poland has provided a vivid text that can trace the impact of U.S. resources upon a local community while uncovering military officers' descriptions of judicial warfare, their paranoid claims that guerrillas have somehow subverted the courts. A marvelous and passionate text that belongs in courses on modern Latin American history or U.S. foreign relations more broadly, *Plan Colombia* illustrates both the merit and promise of U.S.-Latin American relations scholarship, for it best represents how examinations into this history speak to contemporary issues related to the role of the U.S. government abroad and the enduring violence in the Western Hemisphere that did not fade away when a wall was torn down on the other side of the Atlantic.

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