

2013

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Review

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume XIV, No. 25 (2013)

25 March 2013

Roundtable Editors: Dustin Walcher and Diane Labrosse

Roundtable Web/Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Introduction by Dustin Walcher

Jason M. Colby. *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4915-4 (hardcover, \$45.00).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-25.pdf>

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Introduction by Dustin Walcher, Southern Oregon University

When Minor Keith and Andrew Preston combined their respective enterprises in 1899 to form the United Fruit Company (UFCO), they not only created the most important tropical fruit company in the history of the Americas, but they also forged what would ultimately become the embodiment of the U.S. commercial empire in the Caribbean. For generations, historians of U.S.-Latin American relations have examined UFCO's activities, concentrating upon the period between the turn of the century and the 1954 overthrow of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. Despite the attention it has garnered, most scholars have not framed their studies principally as examinations of the company. Rather, historians exploring questions of international politics, economics, and empire have situated United Fruit within their narratives. Consequently, we know more about political and economic themes than we do the social and cultural history of United Fruit.¹

In his first book, Jason Colby makes United Fruit the central object of analysis, and integrates political, economic, social, and cultural themes throughout. "This book is about the intersection of corporate power, U.S. expansion, West Indian migration, and local aspirations in Central America," he explains. Few historians "acknowledge the profound influence of corporate labor policies and worker responses on U.S. relations with the region" (3-4). To understand how U.S. power was projected requires recognition of the fact that "[b]etween 1848 and 1940, it was far more common for the peoples of Central America and the broader Caribbean to encounter U.S. power and labor practices through interactions with private enterprise than with the American state" (4). Colby focuses upon both the effects of United Fruit's labor policies on the social, economic, and political histories of Caribbean countries on the one hand, and their role in forging the U.S. commercial empire on the other. Although UFCO operated throughout the Caribbean basin, the bulk of Colby's attention rests upon Costa Rica and Guatemala – a decision dictated, at least in part, by the remarkable availability of archival sources dealing with the company in those countries.

United Fruit's labor policies within Caribbean countries constitutes the heart of Colby's narrative. He explores how the company's policies helped shape regional socio-political developments. As he notes, "[b]etween 1850 and 1914, some 300,000 West Indians traveled to the Central American rimlands, providing critical labor to foreign enterprises, above all United Fruit and the French and American canal projects" (7). Initially, UFCO encouraged West Indian immigration simply in order to meet its labor demands. However,

¹ See especially Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States and Central America*, 2ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Steve Striffler, *In the Shadows of State and Capital: The United Fruit Company, Popular Struggle, and Agrarian Restructuring in Ecuador, 1900-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); Paul Dosal, *Doing Business with the Dictators: A Political History of United Fruit in Guatemala, 1899-1944* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1993); Lester Langley and Thomas Schoonover, *Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Marcelo Buscheli, *Bananas and Business: The United Fruit Company in Colombia, 1899-2000* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century the company adjusted its approach and began actively recruiting Hispanic workers. Colby argues that United Fruit officials introduced racial divisions among Central American laborers not because they sought to export different variations of Jim Crow abroad, but rather as a tool to forge division throughout the company's labor force. United Fruit's labor policies in turn exerted socio-political effects upon Central American countries by contributing to a wave of Hispanic nationalism. By the 1920s, national governments responded to the complaints of their citizens and mounting racial violence in the banana enclaves by closing their doors to West Indian immigration.

The reviewers find much that is praiseworthy in Colby's scholarship. Alan McPherson posits that the book "is arguably the best since Walter LaFeber's *Inevitable Revolutions* to address the broad implications of U.S.-Central American relations." He concludes that "readers will find in this book a bit of everything one might want to know about United Fruit in Central America in addition to a fascinating case study of the complex implications of U.S. expansionism through the twin motors of profit and discrimination." Thomas O'Brien finds that Colby "offers fresh insights on the company and its labor relations strategy, as well as providing compelling arguments about the role of race in the construction of nationalism in several Central American countries." Michael Schroeder writes that "Colby builds on an already expansive body of scholarship to offer a fresh interpretation that deepens our understanding of the complex interplay of corporate power, state power, labor migration, nationalist movements, racial dynamics, and local aspirations in the formative years of the U.S. imperial enterprise." Moreover, he declares, *The Business of Empire* constitutes "[a] valuable contribution to existing knowledge," that "merits a prominent place on the shelf of anyone interested in the complexities of empire formation during the Golden Age of U.S. imperialism in the circum-Caribbean."

The reviewers also express some reservations. The book's relative positioning on the line between a monograph and a work of synthesis comprises one area of concern for Schroeder. He writes that "... for historical monographs in particular ... original contributions necessarily carry more weight and value than existing knowledge recycled. And these 209 pages evince a fair quantity of the latter, with the demarcations between original and derivative material apparent only in the endnotes."

O'Brien offers that "[o]ne aspect of race that the author might have developed more fully is the comparative discussion of race relations in labor movements." Colby holds that UFCO acted with intention in crafting labor policies dividing Hispanic and West Indian workers. Consequently, Hispanic nationalist discourses emerged that defined West Indians as being outside of the national community. In that sense, United Fruit's policies worked too well, facilitating new legal challenges to West Indian labor in Central America. Perhaps, O'Brien suggests, the most relevant distinction might not be drawn along racial lines, but rather between skilled and unskilled workers.

McPherson argues that "[t]he only overstated argument is that United Fruit divided its labor force along racial lines mostly because it wished to create the kind of divisions that would make it more difficult for workers to unite against the Company." Was it not more

likely, McPherson wonders, that West Indians were hired primarily to fill labor needs? In light of the myriad unforeseen consequences, particularly the political disruptions caused by ethnic divisions that operated counter to UFCO's interests, McPherson reasons that company officials would have promptly reversed course if they had crafted their policies primarily to forestall labor unity.

Finally, Schroeder observes that because Colby chooses to make UFCO the central object of analysis, "the lives and experiences of West Indian laborers and the formation and reformation of their communities remain unexamined." It is difficult to read this as a criticism of Colby's work; after all, all historians must define the scope of their work, and be selective in choosing what material to include in their narratives. But Schroeder's analysis does suggest potentially fruitful avenues for future historians to investigate.

Ultimately, Colby makes a significant contribution to the larger scholarly literature. *The Business of Empire* speaks directly to the interests of at least two distinct scholarly audiences: historians of U.S. foreign relations and historians of Latin America. Moreover, Colby's emphasis upon the intersection of race, business, and U.S. foreign relations contributes to the cultural turn some foreign relations historians have taken since the 1990s. Relatively few historians have produced original research on U.S. foreign relations during the first half of the twentieth century in recent years. Colby's work demonstrates clearly that new and significant insights can still be gleaned from that era.

Participants:

Jason Colby is Associate Professor of History at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. He is the author of *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America* and is currently working on a study of killer whale captivity and the transformation of the Pacific Northwest from the early 1960s to the early 1990s.

Dustin Walcher is Associate Professor of History and Strategic Studies at Southern Oregon University, and a review editor for H-Diplo. He received his Ph.D. in 2007 from the Ohio State University. Working at the intersection of international, political, and economic history, he is currently completing a book manuscript that examines the failure of U.S.-led economic initiatives and the rise of political violence in Argentina during the 1950s and 1960s.

Alan McPherson is Associate Professor of International and Area Studies and ConocoPhillips Chair in Latin American Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* and is presently working on a study of resistance movements to U.S. occupations in Latin America from 1912 to 1934.

Thomas O'Brien is a John and Rebecca Moores Professor of History at the University of Houston. His major area of interest is inter-American relations with a particular focus on the role of American corporations in influencing those relations. His books include *The Revolutionary Mission: American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900-1945*, Cambridge

University Press, 1996 and *The Making the Americas from the Age of Revolutions to the Era of Globalization*, University of New Mexico Press, 2007. He is currently working on an interactive study of the Americas that spans the history of the region from the era of European colonialism to the present.

Michael J. Schroeder earned his Ph.D. in History at the University of Michigan in 1993. An Assistant Professor History at Lebanon Valley College, he teaches on the Atlantic World since 1500, focusing on Latin America and the United States since the Age of Revolution. A social, cultural, and political historian whose research focuses on twentieth-century Nicaragua, he is co-author of the widely used college textbook *The Twentieth Century and Beyond* (McGraw-Hill, 2007) and author of numerous scholarly articles and chapters in his area of expertise.

A score of historians and others have worked on the Boston-based United Fruit Company, seeing in *el pulpo* (the octopus) many of the features of U.S. expansionism. By expanding his focus on United Fruit geographically and topically, Jason Colby's first book is arguably the best since Walter LaFeber's *Inevitable Revolutions* to address the broad implications of U.S.-Central American relations.¹ It enquires into the role of U.S. racism and business practices, as well as the racism of white Central Americans and the tradition of struggle of West Indian laborers, in the formation of empire, nationalism, and labor relations. Colby finds that racial and labor antagonisms in Central America in the first third of the twentieth century were largely a product of U.S. profit-seeking.

Against the argument that United Fruit's mistreatment of its employees of color reflected the racism of the U.S. South, Colby counters, in the closest thing to a thesis statement, that United Fruit's "racial policies did not so much reflect Southern influence as the interplay between West Indians, Central Americans, and corporate labor control strategies in an imperial setting" (2).

Colby describes how each element came to interact with the others on banana plantations. In the late nineteenth century, Minor Keith and other entrepreneurs initially developed the transportation and distribution of bananas, first buying bananas from local growers, then moved into plantation agriculture themselves. In so doing they employed a divided workforce, with a somewhat surprising hierarchy. White U.S. citizens were the owners and top managers. Other groups, such as indigenous peoples and Asians, failed to work out. (One banana executive, importing "562 China-men" in 1873, called them "slaves" (38).) So initially West Indians did almost all the manual work, but, eventually, Central Americans were also hired. Over time, white managers prized black West Indians as foremen and sometimes even as "mandadors," who were in charge of individual farms, because they displayed resistance to local diseases, had railroad or banana experience, and spoke English. This privileged position and its higher pay displeased the white and mixed-race Central Americans who worked below the West Indians. Therefore, Colby argues, the U.S. business practice of dividing a workforce based on race injected a particular racial animosity into Central America.

That hostility, however, was also primed by the preconceptions of West Indians and Central Americans. The former had a long history of working in plantations in relative isolation from outright racial domination, and as British subjects they were ambivalent about integrating fully into Central American society. The latter were much less ambivalent and rejected blacks in 'their' land. White Central Americans also drew upon their past experience of isolating indigenous peoples from the best lands.

¹ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States and Central America*. 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

The result of this ‘interplay’ was a series of labor troubles. Initial ones were mostly strikes aimed at the Company. Later ones were the outcomes of inter-race rivalry, pitting Central Americans against West Indians. By the 1920s, Central American governments instituted restrictions on immigration nominally to encourage the nationalist employment only of Costa Ricans and Guatemalans but in reality they applied, on a racial basis, against West Indians only. Other foreigners, such as Nicaraguans and Hondurans, were never discriminated against.

All these arguments are convincing, as are the subtle differences between Costa Rica and Guatemala stemming from land use and racial patterns. For historians of American foreign relations, they provide a useful overview of race, labor, and Central American politics that illustrates many of the consequences of U.S. imperialism in small countries dominated by U.S. business. Colby notably makes the case that it was business, often more than military or diplomatic necessity, that first introduced U.S. power to the region and that shaped its society and politics. This “corporate colonialism,” writes Colby, “complemented Washington’s activities in the region” (4).

The only overstated argument is that United Fruit divided its labor force along racial lines mostly because it wished to create the kind of divisions that would make it more difficult for workers to unite against the Company. Colby states that dividing the workers was the “most important” reason for elevating blacks above Hispanics (128). Certainly, Colby demonstrates that labor segregation for the sake of weakening organization had long existed in the United States. He also has two quotations providing direct evidence of the intention of weakening class unity through racial disunity (103, 161). But many Central Americans were hired simply, as Colby himself states, “to meet rising labor needs” (128). And the logic of labor segregation seems faulty. Dividing jobs, pay, and housing by race created great animosity between the workers, which backfired and caused endless managerial problems for United Fruit as much as for the workers. It also brought about the intromission of the Costa Rican and Guatemalan governments, which hurt the Company even more. Why didn’t United Fruit at least reverse its policy in the face of such a backlash if the only reason was to divide the workers? It is more likely that United Fruit divided the workforce because it seemed to follow the natural order of things for white Americans and for white Central Americans while it did not at first inconvenience West Indians, who enjoyed a privileged position. Labor segregation appears not to have been a deliberate decision linked to limiting disorder, or at least it was one that had misunderstood unintended consequences.

The book presents original archival research only on Costa Rica and Guatemala—two admittedly important areas of operation for United Fruit—but does so to a remarkable degree, through rich sources such as the British National Archives and especially the correspondence of United Fruit employees found in the Costa Rican National Archives, a never before seen ‘mother lode’ of insight into labor practices (12). Not only is Colby able to demonstrate larger patterns of U.S. business through these two countries, but he admirably confirms those patterns through detailed analyses of similar situations of third-country West Indian labor forces in Panama, Cuba, and elsewhere.

His findings, therefore, are of broad relevance not only to Central America but also the Caribbean. They complement well the work of scholars of United Fruit such as Paul Dosal on its political connections, Lester Langley and Thomas D. Schoonover on its connections to U.S. “mercenaries and entrepreneurs,” and Steve Striffler’s longer-term view.² In uncovering new documents and analyzing labor divisions, Colby’s work is closest to that of Philippe Bourgois, which is more ethnographic in nature.³ He also complements the more focused Central American race and labor work of Glenn Chambers, Avi Chomsky, Darío Euraque, Mark Moberg, and Fred Opie by broadening the scope of his subject and by providing background on U.S. racial ideas and practices in the nineteenth and twentieth century as well as the equivalent from white Central Americans.⁴

In short, readers will find in this book a bit of everything one might want to know about United Fruit in Central America in addition to a fascinating case study of the complex implications of U.S. expansion through the twin motors of profit and discrimination.

² Paul Dosal, *Doing Business with the Dictators: A Political History of United Fruit in Guatemala, 1899-1944* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1993); Lester Langley and Thomas D. Schoonover, *Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Steve Striffler, *In the Shadows of State and Capital: The United Fruit Company, Popular Struggle, and Agrarian Restructuring in Ecuador, 1900-1995* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992).

³ Philippe Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Banana Plantation*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

⁴ Glenn Chambers, *Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras, 1890-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Avi Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940*; Darío Euraque, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic: Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Mark Moberg, *Myths of Ethnicity and Nation: Immigration, Work, and Identity in the Belize Banana Industry* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997); Frederick Douglass Opie, *Black Labor Migration in Caribbean Guatemala, 1882-1923* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

Review by Thomas O'Brien, University of Houston

Historians studying the United Fruit Company (UFC), perhaps the most compelling example of the early American corporate empire in Latin America, have had to proceed with the patience of archaeologists carefully scraping away debris to expose the reality beneath the earth's crust. For historians, that slow and laborious task has been due not to the accretion of historical sediment, but to deliberate corporate policies of destroying company records. Yet even those slow and difficult excavations have resulted in breakthroughs that expose new features and formations. Jason Colby's *The Business of Empire* offers one such advance.

Like several other young scholars, Colby has found that by mining local archival sources (in this case the records of UFC's Northern Railway in the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica) he has been able to shed new light on the workings of UFC in the region. In particular, Colby focuses on the company's use of labor division based on race in order to control a workforce that included both British West Indians and local workers. More importantly, he demonstrates that by the 1930s the corporation's preferential placement of West Indians in the more skilled positions created a backlash in several Central American countries, including Costa Rica and Guatemala. Corporate policies that effectively denied Hispanics access to most of the better paying jobs mobilized these workers, who began to define their plight in terms of national interests. Local politicians, anxious to pacify their increasingly militant workers while reining in some of the power long exercised by UFC, pressured the company to change its hiring policies, and limit its use of West Indians. Along the way, national identity formation in Central American countries developed a critical racial component.

As Colby points out, the precise manner in which labor militancy, domestic political opportunism, and corporate expediency played out varied from country to country. Costa Rica provided the most striking example of a racially influenced nationalism, as Costa Ricans continued to construct an identity as a 'white' nation despite the presence of thousands of black workers and their families on the Caribbean coast. And as the author demonstrates in the final chapters of his work, racially tinged forms of national identity remain influential in the contemporary affairs of these countries. One aspect of race that the author might have developed more fully is the comparative discussion of race relations in labor movements. For example, to what extent were divisions between workers derived not solely from racial and national distinctions, but from differences in interests between skilled and unskilled workers as discussed in Jeffrey Gould's *To Lead as Equals*¹ So too, how did the Central Americans' experiences match up with those of Cuban sugar workers whose ranks already included Afro Cubans, in addition to Haitian and Jamaican immigrants? Does this help explain why in some cases during the 1933 Cuban rebellion, Haitians and Jamaicans fully supported the Cuban workers' seizure of sugar plantations? Such comparisons would certainly broaden the impact of this study's findings.

¹ Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Beyond its insights into UFC's policies that created racially divided workforces, and the influence of race on national identity formation, Colby's book also explores the important role the company played in the creation of the American empire in the Western Hemisphere. As the author notes, officials in Washington and at United Fruit shared common perceptions of non-white populations. At the same time, Washington saw UFC as an important tool for 'civilizing' Latin Americans, while the company could rely on U.S. diplomatic pressure and shows of force when needed to further, or protect its interests. But while the study offers some additional specific information on these relations it does not provide any strikingly new interpretations. For example, the author notes quite correctly that by the time of the U.S. intervention in Guatemala in 1954, the official view of UFC in Washington had darkened considerably. But he does not explore the fact that in considering the possibility of intervention, the Eisenhower administration appears to have acted in Guatemala largely out of concern that any limitations imposed on UFC would encourage nationalists in South America to attack far more valuable U.S. investments in mining and petroleum. Such examples would help create a more nuanced interpretation of how UFC and Washington interacted in shaping the empire, and to what extent government officials maintained a larger perspective in which the company was only one element in a rapidly expanding imperial process.

But the limitations of this study in terms of UFC's role in the American empire and the comparative aspects of labor movements cannot diminish the fact that this is a fine first book. It offers fresh insight on the company and its labor relations strategy, as well as providing compelling arguments about the role of race in the construction of nationalism in several Central American countries. It is an important new addition to the efforts of historians to recreate and reinterpret the history of United Fruit by exploring new avenues and venues for research and analysis.

You are United Fruit Company. What do you do when your meticulously crafted strategies for controlling labor – strategies that have served you well for over three decades, garnering untold millions in profits and making you one of the most powerful economic players in the Western Hemisphere – turn around and bite you on the nose?

Thoughtfully conceived, carefully researched, and engagingly written, Jason M. Colby's *The Business of Empire* represents a valuable addition to the burgeoning literature on the 'golden age' of U.S. imperial expansion across the circum-Caribbean from the 1890s through the 1930s. Weaving together a compelling narrative focusing on the role of private capital in the process of empire formation – exemplified here by the corporate giant of the era, *el pulpo* ("the octopus") United Fruit Company, with its tentacles stretching from Boston to New Orleans to Guatemala to Colombia and beyond – Colby builds on an already expansive body of scholarship to offer a fresh interpretation that deepens our understanding of the complex interplay of corporate power, state power, labor migration, nationalist movements, racial dynamics, and local aspirations in the formative years of the U.S. imperial enterprise.

Based on extensive research in archives and repositories in the United States, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and the United Kingdom, and in continual dialogue with the secondary literature – the great bulk of the latter, it must be said, from the Anglophone world – Colby argues that private capital acted as the spearhead of U.S. imperial domination across much of the circum-Caribbean in the decades before World War II. It is a compelling argument, reminiscent of how the British East India Company pioneered the colonization of India before 1858, or the Virginia Company's colonization of the Chesapeake Bay region in the early 1600s. Biases and lacunae in the documentary record mean that scholars have conventionally emphasized the role of the state – its militaries, diplomats, and foreign policy-making elite – at the expense of a more holistic treatment that situates the imperial state within a broader matrix of power relationships.

Colby's emphasis thus offers a welcome corrective to more state-centric accounts and dovetails with much recent work on the role of private actors and capitalist enterprises in colonial and imperial projects, as exemplified in the work of Robin Blackburn, Aviva Chomsky, Greg Grandin, and Aims McGuinness, among many others.¹ Blackburn, for instance, argues that it was merchants and planters, not ministers or bureaucrats, who provided the principal impetus behind the nearly 400 years of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, while Chomsky, Grandin, McGuinness, and others offer compelling inquiries into how

¹ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800* (London: Verso, 1997); Aviva Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2009); Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

the actions of imperial capitalists and entrepreneurs both dovetailed with, and diverged from, the geostrategic interests of imperial states. Underscoring the central role played by private capital in the process of empire formation and racial domination, Colby finds himself in some very good company.

The nub of his argument is that across Central America, United Fruit Company implemented a labor control strategy, rooted in the experiences of northern U.S. industrialists, that hinged on dividing and stratifying workers and institutionalizing racial differences among white administrators (at the top), Hispanic laborers (at the bottom), and black Anglophone West Indian laborers (a mite higher than the bottom). After more than three decades of relative success (ca. 1910s-1930s), this strategy backfired in the face of emergent, racially-charged nationalist discourses in Costa Rica, Guatemala, and elsewhere that insisted on the exclusion of black West Indian laborers on which the company depended. In short, “the firm itself had helped generate the anti-black sentiment that [from the mid-1930s] constricted its labor system” (p. 189). By zeroing in on the contradictions and ironies of United Fruit’s imperial enterprise, Colby offers a compelling conceptual framework for an enriched understanding the complexities and nuances of this pivotal period.

Focusing the bulk of his attention on Costa Rica and Guatemala – not coincidentally, the nation-states with the most robust archival evidence relating to United Fruit and its sprawling enterprises – Colby also casts a broad net to include United Fruit’s activities in Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras and British Honduras (Belize), Cuba, and Colombia. The dual focus on Costa Rica and Guatemala is especially apt, not only because both were central to the company’s practices of “corporate colonialism,” but also because of their “strikingly divergent political cultures and racial alchemies” (pp. 4, 10). Emergent Costa Rican nationalist discourses constructed ‘the nation’ as white, with no substantial indigenous or African racial legacy, and thus naturally inclined toward democracy and social harmony. Guatemalan nationalist projects of the same period, in contrast, constructed a stark divide separating the country’s hispanicized Ladinos from its indigenous majority, thereby discursively legitimating the state’s coercive labor control laws and often heavy-handed authoritarian rule.

The book is smartly organized into three parts with two meaty chapters each. Part I, stretching from the aftermath of the Mexican-American War to Theodore Roosevelt’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (1848-1904), is mostly background and context and based mainly on existing scholarship. Part II takes us to the aftermath of the Great War, while Part III continues to the mid-1930s. The Epilogue gestures toward World War II and its aftermath, but the book substantively ends with the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, the 1934 banana workers’ strike in Costa Rica, and United Fruit’s power being dramatically undermined by the racially-divided labor regime it was instrumental in creating.

Given the abundant existing scholarship on which Colby draws, the line between derived and original material is often hard to discern without continuous reference to the endnotes, especially in Part I. A typical section in Chapter Two, for instance, titled “Making a Ladino

Nation in Guatemala,” is roughly one-third original and two-thirds derived, with the section’s original contribution consisting of one paragraph based on a series of letters from an American couple in Guatemala (70-72). Sandwiched between crisp synopses of existing scholarship, this new material at best adds texture and detail to what is already known. The same is true of the chapter’s last section, “The Northern Railway and Racial Hierarchy,” where new material, tucked into a narrative derived from secondary works published over the past two decades, comes from a March 1902 petition from the UK National Archives (72-75). This tendency attenuates markedly in Parts II and III, which are based principally on unpublished archival materials, though it never disappears entirely.

One of the book’s main strengths – its continuous dialogue with a range of existing literatures on empire, race, labor relations, migration, and related topics – thus also constitutes one of its relative shortcomings. A fair portion of the book is derived from what is already known. This is not to suggest that all new scholarship must be comprised of wholly new and original material. As scholars in this era of exploding knowledge production, we are all engaged in a collaborative project in which the production of new knowledge must necessarily build on what has come before. But it is to suggest that for historical monographs in particular – especially those focused on Central America, where primary sources are limited and often difficult to access, and where scholars often base much of their research on secondary works – original contributions necessarily carry more weight and value than existing knowledge recycled. And these 209 pages evince a fair quantity of the latter, with the demarcations between original and derivative material apparent only in the endnotes.

Positioning United Fruit Company as the principal protagonist in this unfolding drama also carries both benefits and costs. One of the costs – forthrightly acknowledged in the Introduction – is that the lives and experiences of West Indian laborers and the formation and reformation of their communities remain unexamined (11-12). Colby’s decision not to explore this terrain is sensible and appropriate, though it also underscores that a more holistic understanding of this period still awaits.

Among the book’s most compelling features is the conceptual framework that undergirds it. Few would disagree that the quality of any piece of scholarship is most shaped by the quality of the questions that guide it. Inquiring into the intersecting dynamics of race, empire, nationalism, capital, and labor, Colby asks a series of excellent questions, while his answers enrich and deepen our understanding in important ways.

His study also opens up many avenues for further research. Its treatment of the banana industry in Eastern Nicaragua, for instance, where the United Fruit Company was not a major player, is necessarily thin. In this racially and linguistically complex zone, with its large Miskitu Indian population, long-settled black Creole community, and rapidly growing West Indian and Western Nicaraguan ‘Spanish’ migrant communities – alongside small but influential groups of Chinese and Middle-Eastern merchants and traders and ‘bamboo whites’ – one wonders how the smaller banana companies – Standard Fruit, Cuyamel Fruit, and others – followed strategies similar to or different from United Fruit’s. The same can be said of the region’s lumbering and mining industries. Such export enclaves in Nicaragua

and beyond – whether producing fruit, lumber, minerals, or other commodities – merit more attention than they have received to date. Colby's study is thus well positioned to spur further research into these and related centers of transnational capital accumulation and the social and cultural dynamics they engendered.

A valuable contribution to existing knowledge, Colby's book merits a prominent place on the shelf of anyone interested in the complexities of empire formation during the Golden Age of U.S. imperialism in the circum-Caribbean. Suitable for upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, and specialists, the book is rigorous, sophisticated, and accessible, and its core arguments will (I am convinced) stand the test of time.

So what happens when your carefully crafted strategies for controlling labor turn around and bite you on the nose? In Colby's telling, your power wanes, you improvise and muddle through, when your land and power are threatened you enlist the aid of the CIA to overthrow a democratically elected government (Guatemala 1954), and then you are broken up in an anti-trust suit by the imperial government that has come to see you as an impediment to its own ballooning imperial designs. Then you are bought out and adopt a sequence of different names (United Brands, Chiquita Brands); you are compelled to relent on issues of land and labor control; your power wanes further; and the legacies you have bequeathed continue to reverberate long after you have morphed into shadows of your former self. It stands as fitting testament to the book's high quality that it concludes in a stew of messy realities and untidy denouements and ambiguities that of necessity remain unresolved.

Author's Response by Jason M. Colby, University of Victoria

To start, I would like to thank H-Diplo Review Editor Dustin Walcher for organizing this roundtable review of my book, *The Business of Empire*. I also want thank the three reviewers for taking the time to contribute to it. Writing a book, especially a first book, is a long, lonely endeavor, and it is wonderful to receive such generous and thoughtful feedback from three scholars whose work I deeply admire.

Since the reviewers have summarized my arguments quite well, I will offer just a brief reflection on the work. The book evolved partly as a product of the 'cultural turn' in U.S. international history. In particular, I was interested in the racial currents of the U.S. empire in the early twentieth century Caribbean, and I was frustrated that previous scholarship had focused largely on the rhetoric of U.S. officials rather than the impact of U.S. policies and power on local societies. At the same time, influenced by works such as Thomas O'Brien's *Revolutionary Mission* and my own travels, I became fascinated by U.S. business history in Central America.¹ Although diplomatic historians had long taken American economic interests into account in explaining U.S. policy, few had explored the links and parallels between American corporations and the U.S. government in the region. For me, the issues of race and labor surrounding United Fruit's activities became a means to draw together the history of American business expansion, U.S. empire-building policy, and Central American nation formation.

In addition to praising various aspects of the book, the reviewers raise several questions that I would like to address. In his contribution, Alan McPherson situates the book within the scholarly literature, noting its connection to studies such as Philippe Bourgois's *Ethnicity at Work*, which traces the process by which various ethnographic groups assumed specific roles in a United Fruit enclave in Panama.² In doing so, McPherson raises questions of the intentionality behind United Fruit's labor system. My only "overstated argument," he asserts, "is that United Fruit divided its labor forces along racial lines mostly because it wished to create the kind of divisions that would make it more difficult for workers to unite against the Company." A more likely scenario, he suggests, is that the company simply hired Central Americans to fill labor needs.

There is an important grain of truth in this point, but it needs broader contextualization. As internal United Fruit documents reveal, the company specifically sought out Spanish-speaking Central Americans in 1909-1910 in order to break West Indian labor resistance and undercut future worker solidarity. Over the following years, as this growing number of Central Americans clashed with West Indian coworkers, official Central American harassment of, and restrictions on, black immigrants mounted. This increasingly

¹ Thomas F. O'Brien, *The Revolutionary Mission: American Enterprise in Latin America, 1900-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

² Philippe Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Banana Plantation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

inhospitable environment in Costa Rica and Guatemala reduced the number of West Indians immigrants available to the company, forcing it to rely more heavily on Central Americans. In sum, McPherson is correct that United Fruit increasingly relied on Central American laborers out of necessity, but it was a necessity that its labor segmentation policies helped create.

On a related point, McPherson asks why the company would have adopted a labor segmentation policy that “brought the intromission of the Costa Rican and Guatemala governments?” The best answer to this question is that the company could not have anticipated the political impact that its labor policies would have on its host nations. Accustomed to running their divisions as imperial enclaves, United Fruit managers seemed genuinely shocked when political trends in their host nations (even trends stemming partly from company policies) intruded on the banana lands. This was particularly true during the wave of Hispanic nationalism that swept the region in the 1920s.

Similarly, McPherson asks “Why didn’t United Fruit at least reverse its policy in the face of such a backlash if the only reason was to divide the workers?” The best answer to this is, simply: “It did.” In fact, Part III of the book is essentially about the process by which the Central American backlash forced the company to forego its established labor system in order to remain viable in Central America.

For his part, Thomas O’Brien, too, offers much appreciated praise. But he also notes that the book might have better developed the “comparative discussion of race relations in labor movements.” In particular, he asks if labor identity and divisions formed along skill levels rather than race and nationality, which, as he notes, was evident in some instances in Cuba.

The quick answer to this question is that the divisions between Central Americans and West Indians in United Fruit’s operations were rarely transcended by identification along skill levels of workers. The few examples of apparent cross-racial solidarity are impossible to disentangle from the context of violent racial intimidation that had come to define the lives of West Indian immigrants in Central America by the 1920s. In fact, it is worth noting that this was equally true of the example O’Brien cites. After all, Jamaican and Haitian workers in Cuba opted to support the actions of Cuban workers in the context of the virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric that marked the upheavals of 1933.

In his trenchant and witty review, Michael Schroeder, too, lauds the framing of the book while also offering a number of thoughtful questions. His most important critique is that the line between synthesis and original contribution is often difficult to discern in *The Business of Empire*. For historical monographs, “especially those focused on Central America,” he notes, “original contributions necessarily carry more weight and value than existing knowledge recycled,” and the original contribution of the book is not always clear without reference to the endnotes.

This is a fair point, and in many ways Schroeder has put his finger on a dilemma that confronts all historians, particularly those writing their first books. On the one hand, an

author needs to make his or her original contribution clear. This is, after all, the essential function of the monograph and a defining moment for a young scholar. On the other hand, one needs to connect to other scholarship and frame an analysis that draws upon other historians. It is not always an easy balance, particularly as presses increasingly push authors to remove methodological discussion and other scholarly apparatuses in order to make their books more accessible.

But this issue is also partly reflective of differences between the two main historical fields in which *The Business of Empire* is situated. Over the past fifteen years, Latin American history has moved increasingly toward regional and subregional studies within individual nations, and monographs in the field tend to foreground theory, sources, and methodology. In contrast, although U.S. international historians have drawn from the approaches of area studies, they tend to make broader geographic connections and continue to adopt a more narrative framework.

Early reviews of my book have underscored its awkward place between these two camps. One distinguished scholar of U.S. diplomatic history, for example, praised *The Business of Empire* but lamented my failure to frame the story more broadly by drawing upon the historiography of the U.S. empire and labor in the Pacific.³ In contrast, one young Latin Americanist reviewer regretted that I did not focus exclusively on Costa Rica and Guatemala, leaving aside the larger connections to U.S. empire and the Caribbean.⁴

Considering these differences, it should hardly come as a surprise that the framing and organization of this book were by far the most difficult tasks. I wrestled extensively with the problem of striking a balance between my original research on United Fruit and labor in Costa Rica and Guatemala, and my broader scholarly concerns about race and the U.S. empire. Inevitably, this process was influenced by my reading of new scholarship, including a large number of dissertation-cum-first books whose narrow focus and obsessive positioning within the scholarly literature I found tiresome.

In the end, I decided that if my first book had to be a monograph, I wanted it to be a monograph that people might want to read. This meant weaving my original source work and analysis into a clear chronological framework with a narrative drive that spoke to larger themes and questions. It also meant minimizing the explicit discussions of historiography and scholarly debate that tend to drive away non-specialist readers.

³ Thomas Schoover, Review of Jason M. Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America*, *Journal of American History* 99:3 (2012): 943-944

⁴ Carolyne Ryan, Review of Jason M. Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America*, H-Empire, H-Net Reviews (20 November 2012)

Nevertheless, the opinions of specialists are deeply important to me, as they are to all scholars. And, on that note, I would like to thank the editor and reviewers once again for taking the time to read the book and to think carefully about it. It has been an honor and a pleasure to have this dialogue with them about my work.

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