Review Essay

Barrington Moore in Latin America: Coffee, power, and modernity

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At the end of the twentieth century as academia experiences the ultimate relativism of post-modernism, we see a continuing quest for ultimate truths and a return to grand theories. This is certainly true in studies on Latin America. Academics and intellectuals are trying to find answers to fundamental questions concerning the past, present and future of the societies they study. Themes centre around the long-term political and social consequences of economic development of the Latin American nations. Many people have asked themselves whether it is possible to create a situation in Latin America in which democracy and social equality predominate. Although new catch-words for short-term political projects are invented every day – 'decentralization', 'good governance' and 'integration' being the most recent – the quest for long-term answers to the structural problems of Latin American society remains very much alive.

Barrington Moore on Dictatorship and Democracy

A clear sign of this tendency is the (re)discovery of the work of Barrington Moore among Latin Americanists. In his monumental Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (1966), Barrington Moore developed a historical model which focused on agrarian class relations in order to explain divergent routes of development to the modern world. His ultimate goal was to analyze the origins of democracy
and authoritarianism.¹ In his famous study he distinguished three main historical routes from the preindustrial era to the modern world. The first route referred to societies where a ‘bourgeois revolution’ had occurred that later developed into democratic capitalist societies (Great Britain, France, the United States). The second pertained to societies which developed into a capitalist system by an authoritarian ‘revolution from above’, taking a reactionary direction (Germany, Japan). The third route involved what Moore called ‘peasant revolutions’ whereby great agrarian bureaucracies inhibited commercial and industrial impulses, thus ultimately leading to communist societies (China, Russia). Barrington Moore suggested a fourth route of neither capitalism nor communism and mentioned India as a possible example.

Moore’s book was widely read at the time and it provoked many different reactions. It was reviewed so many times and from so many angles that an analysis of all the reviews was the subject of an article.² It won much acclaim for its broad perspective and comparative ambitions. In the book reviewed below, Jeffery Paige calls it ‘the single most influential account of the transformation of modern political structures’ (p. 316). But there was also criticism. Some authors accused Moore of economic determinism; others complained about the absence of cultural and ideological factors. More serious were the theoretical objections, especially those concerning class relations and the lack of clarity as to the concepts used by Moore. Notwithstanding these points of critique, Moore’s bold attempt to explain the historical roots of democracy and dictatorship was epoch-making.

Lord and Peasant in Latin America

Latin America was conspicuously absent in Moore’s grand scheme (just as, by the way, was Africa). Although the book was quickly translated into Spanish, it was not widely distributed in Latin America, and as far as I know, it was not widely read by Latin Americanists. In any case, few attempts were made to apply his framework to Latin America.³ That situation is now rapidly changing. Three books have appeared that explicitly take Barrington Moore’s model as a point of departure, and other publications may be under way.⁴ In the book Agrarian Structure and Political Power edited by Evelyne Huber and Frank Safford, several leading historians discuss the possibilities of applying Moore’s ideas to Latin America. The result is a number of interesting essays on a selection of Latin American countries. However, the fact that they are inspired by a single model does not give this book the coherence a reader might hope for. Some contributions, most notably those of Florencia Mallon and Tulio Halperin Donghi, hardly touch the basic issues brought forward by Barrington Moore. Others, like those written by Arnold Bauer on Chile and Frank Safford on Colombia, demonstrate how difficult it is to apply general theories to specific historical situations. Safford clearly illustrates the problems of applying Moore’s general ideas to the regionally fragmented reality of a country such as Colombia, where the state was unable to impose its authority. Coffee tended to unite Colombian society, just as did, paradoxically, the civil war, usually called the Violencia, after 1946. But it is not easy to explain Colombian society using Moore’s model. The Violencia was not the result of an authoritarian regime, but rather of political competi-
tion among elites, often on a regional level. In addition, where the state intervened, it was certainly not always in favour of the larger landowners. Safford’s conclusion is cautious: ‘In all of this there are elements that can be crammed into a modified version of the Moore framework; but the total picture is so mixed as to defy easy and categorical generalization’ (p. 146).

The essay on Central America by Lowell Gudmundson offers an interesting contrast. It is the only one that effectively applies Moore’s comparative approach and in some cases is able to confirm some of his theses. Gudmundson shows the potential of a broad comparative framework for the analysis of recent Latin American history. He starts out with the ‘typical’ democratic route taken by Costa Rica. Using recent historical research, he questions the power of the coffee-processing elite and underscores the dynamics of a peasant society which led to an increasing differentiation among producers. Gudmundson concludes that the Costa Rican coffee economy appears to confirm much of the Moore thesis: ‘A commercially based processor group constitutes what amounts to a primarily nonlanded elite, a working bourgeoisie for practical purposes; and the development of petit bourgeois groups in the countryside, both allies and adversaries in political and economic terms, leads eventually to competitive electoral regimes’ (p. 156). At the same time, we may add, this quote shows how only a very liberal use of Moore’s schematic framework makes it possible to apply it to the concrete historical circumstances of Latin America. This point is also made by Gudmundson himself when he points at the difficulties in identifying the key factors which determine the timing and direction of political change in Central America.

The key problem in applying Moore’s model is the role of what he calls the ‘bourgeoisie’, the ‘chief actor in the drama’ (p. 422). Barrington Moore does not give a very precise definition of this crucial class, but between the lines of his analysis it becomes clear that he is talking about what other people would call the ‘urban middle class’. He defines it in one place as ‘a vigorous and independent class of town dwellers’ (p. 418). These newly established groups were simultaneously the result and instigator of democratic modernization. They were, in his eyes, the only groups that could break the power of the traditional landlord class. Gudmundson rightly draws attention to the vagueness which surrounds this crucial class in Moore’s analysis. He points to the ironic situation in which the middle classes are generally assigned a central role in the emergence of European fascism, whereas Central American analysts, just as Moore, have often portrayed them as basically progressive and reformist. Such contradictions highlight the problems of comparative analysis.

Coffee and power in Central America

This remark could also serve as a point of departure for the review of Jeffery Paige’s *Coffee and Power* and Robert Williams’ *States and Social Evolution*. Paige wrote an influential comparative analysis of agrarian revolutions more than twenty years ago. He now focuses on three Central American countries, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. They share a number of characteristics, of which the importance of coffee as the predominant agricultural export commodity may well be the most important. Nevertheless, the political development of these countries in the twentieth century has been widely divergent.
The recent history of the three countries may be seen as examples of the three routes described by Barrington Moore: the democratic one in Costa Rica, the authoritarian one in El Salvador and the communist one in Nicaragua. In analyzing these different routes Paige focuses on the predominant role of the coffee elites in the construction of these states. In the first part of the book he sketches the contours of the notorious coffee oligarchies which have dominated Central American politics for so long. Taking advantage of strong kinship networks these families combined entrepreneurial instincts with conservative political leanings. The so-called ‘fourteen families’ of El Salvador or the ‘dynasty of the conquerors’ of Costa Rica may be taken as extreme examples of these groups. Their power was based on the absence of alternative power channels. These families were the only institutions through which political power could be acquired. The most intriguing parts of Paige’s book are those in which he analyses the political narratives of these all-powerful families. Unfortunately, his presentation of these narratives is rather short and sketchy, probably because he was not allowed to quote his informants literally. This itself may be considered an indication of the polarized political relations in these countries.

Though coffee was the mainstay of the Central American elite, this did not mean that the elite was political and economically homogeneous. There existed a fundamental dualism between the landed or agrarian factions on the one hand, and the manufacturing, agro-industrial on the other. Paige’s analysis is based on the divergent political behaviour of these groups. Where the former tended to adhere to authoritarian and repressive political projects, the latter often favoured moderate reforms leading to the incorporation of oppositional movements. The tragedy of twentieth-century Central American politics was that the two groups were closely linked by social and kinship relations. The bonds between the agrarian and agro-industrial factions of the elite tied the latter to the authoritarian politics of the former. Only in Costa Rica where the agrarian sector was dominated by small and medium producers and the agrarian elite was the weakest did something like a democratic system evolve.

The most important problem with Paige’s application of Barrington Moore’s model is his interpretation of the ‘bourgeoisie’. Contrary to Moore, Paige sees the Central American coffee elite as the prime representative of this class. He makes an explicit distinction between this elite and the middle classes and then concludes that the agrarian ‘bourgeoisie’ of coffee processors was not the driving force behind the ‘bourgeois revolution’ of Figueres in Costa Rica. The real revolution had to be made by the poor and middle classes. Paige stresses that ‘the bourgeoisie could be a progressive force in winning the civil rights necessary for the defense of markets and property, but middle and working classes were usually responsible for the extension of full democratic rights’ (p. 323). This leads Paige to conclude that the concept of a ‘bourgeois democratic revolution’ which is so central to Moore’s thesis, is at least quite problematic. We may ask, however, why it was necessary to first construct a straw horse and then trample upon it. Moore may rightly be criticized for the vagueness of his concept of the ‘bourgeoisie’, but in his book he never suggested that he is exclusively referring to the Marxist notion of a bourgeoisie of large entrepreneurs and power-holders.

Robert Williams’ book, *States and Social Evolution*, which was published in 1994, at first sight looks very similar to the one written by Paige. The subtile
'Coffee and the Rise of National Governments in Central America' indicates its theme. Although Williams also takes Barrington Moore's ideas as a point of departure, his book is quite different from Paige's, however. After describing the rise of the coffee economy in the Central American republics, he presents a comparative framework based on the analysis of the three factors of production in the nineteenth century: land, capital and labour. The history of every Central American country in his book is analyzed according to these factors. This leads to a somewhat unexciting sequence of studies by country. Short, concise overviews of the different Central American countries are to its merit, but at the same time it lacks conceptual originality. The most interesting point of Williams' study is the emphasis on internal factors in explaining the variety of historical development in Central America. Williams points first to pre-existing customs of land use to explain the widely divergent trajectories of the Central American countries. His conclusion is that the nature of state institutions and the political cultures within which they operated were shaped by the formation of the coffee economy and the conflicts associated with its formation (p. 229). Williams' rejection of dependency approaches is explicit when he writes that 'world system forces did not transplant into Central America any particular mode of economic or political organization (p. 236). The amazing diversity of economic and political structures forces researchers, in his view, to look at local causes for explanations.

Because of such variety at the local level, Williams concludes that a direct application of Barrington Moore's premise to the national level does not yield results. His surprising conclusion is that at the municipal level Moore's ideas have more validity. The particular agrarian social formation of a given area strongly influenced the political process on a local and regional level. With the consolidation of the coffee economy, the coffee elite used its experience at the municipal level to seize control over the national state. In this way, the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed a decisive reorientation of government policy toward the promotion of export activity in general and coffee culture in particular (p. 240). This conclusion is surprising because Barrington Moore's model was formulated at the highly aggregate level of large national states like the United States, France, China and India.

Export agriculture and politics

The growth of export agriculture had a decisive impact on Latin American social development and the shaping of Latin American politics. It may therefore come as no surprise that much research has focused on the nature of these export crops to explain the specifics of Latin American politics. The importance of external influences on the continent's historical development may complicate the application of Barrington Moore's ideas on Latin America. Authors who have published important monographs on different Latin American regions have now combined their expertise on coffee as an export product in the book Coffee, Society, and Power in Latin America. The result of this endeavour is a highly interesting comparative volume. Using a different point of departure, these essays ask essentially the same questions as the above-mentioned books. They attempt to understand the historical diversity in
the development of different Latin American agrarian societies and the influence of these variations on political processes occurring in these societies.

This collection of articles owes its attractiveness to the strong empirical basis of most of the contributions, allowing for a broad comparative approach. The essays in this book present what Charles Tilly has called 'universalizing' and 'variation finding' comparisons. By using general theories and comparative perspectives they succeed in pointing out the commonalities and differences between societies that resulted from export-oriented development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The essays by McCreery on Guatemala and Pérez Brignoli on the repression of the 1932 peasant rebellion in El Salvador show how coffee production could lead to profoundly authoritarian and repressive social relations. It may not be a coincidence that these are also the countries with the most polarized social relations, which can be considered archetypal of the dictatorial road towards modernization. In what may be the best essay in the book, Michael Jiménez uses the same class-oriented approach to analyze the Colombian situation. The historical development in Colombia was characterized by its regional fragmentation. Jiménez underscores how the expansion of the coffee economy was accompanied by all kinds of ideological engineering meant to defend the regional coffee interests and to increase state control over the working classes. For their part, Lowell Gudmundson on Costa Rica and Fernando Picó on Puerto Rico demonstrate how the use of local documents is essential for our understanding of social and economic processes on a micro level.

To a certain extent, these essays may be viewed as an implicit critique of the generalizing pretensions of Barrington Moore and his followers. Instead of looking for general structures, they stress local and regional class relations. Roseberry writes: 'A comparatives analysis of class formation and power that concentrates on the ways in which particular elites confronted and resolved particular problems (...) can take us beyond programmatic statements about particular kinds of states and illuminate the dynamics and contradictions of class and state formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (p. 27).

Barrington Moore in Latin America: thirty years later

It is clear that the books reviewed in this essay may all be considered as belonging to a particular strand of historiography. Most authors are educated in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of research which is influenced by historical materialism and combines theoretical discussions with concrete empirical research. They show that, in an epoch in which political Marxism has been thoroughly marginalized, the scientific heritage of Marxist thinking is still very much alive. This may be explained by the continuing search by historians and social scientists to answer the 'great' questions posed by the development of human society. Politically utopian or not, Marxism has provided the analytical tools which produce important research, especially because it has attempted to answer comparative and empirical questions.

It is an interesting metahistorical question why Barrington Moore has had so little influence in Latin America. The answer should, in my opinion, be sought in the differences between Anglo-Saxon and Latin American academic tradi-
tions. There have always been cultural and ideological obstacles concerning the introduction of US ideas into Latin America. First, there is the language barrier. Because the Spanish translation of Moore’s work has not been widely available in Latin America, his ideas have only reached a small group of intellectuals. Second, and more interesting, Barrington Moore may be considered a Marxist, though (just as, for instance, E.P. Thompson) a non-dogmatic, even heretical one. The Latin American academic climate of the 1970s and ‘80s was not very receptive to his creative and liberal use of Marxist ideas. Neither did his work lead to clear-cut political strategies. There is no doubt that his conclusions, especially those that depicted the potentially conservative and even reactionary attitude of the peasantry, were not considered ‘fashionable’ among intellectuals of the period. In addition, it is true that Moore did not write about Latin America; therefore, his ideas may not be applicable to Latin America.

The question then is whether these recently published books have added something to our understanding of Latin America that was missing before. To what extent have they succeeded in showing the value of Moore’s ideas for understanding Latin America’s past and future? The answer remains equivocal. On the one hand, it is clear that Moore’s ideas act as inspiring heuristic instruments for analyzing Latin America’s route to modernity. They force historians and social scientists to find long-term explanations for the historical development of the different Latin American countries. In addition, they offer a conceptual model which allows for comparative analysis both between Latin America and other parts of the world and between different regions on the continent.

On the other hand, Barrington Moore published his book in 1966. Many new insights have been formulated since then. By staying close to the modernist ideas prevalent at the time Moore wrote his book, the books reviewed here — although recently published — make a somewhat outdated impression. They tend to present a quite mechanistic and unilinear image of the development of capitalism. This is unsatisfying not because the themes and problems they analyze are no longer important — inequality, authoritarianism and political instability remain essential features of present-day Latin America —, but because of their implicit unilinear perspective. They study the development of the Latin American export economy and changing class relations in the context of a global economy and an increasingly intervening state. Theirs is a story of a uniform and steadily advancing capitalism in spite of regional variation and differences. They depict a single-minded development of capitalism and an unavoidable historical process of modernization.

This tendency must be considered partly as the result of the strong influence of Marxism, which was, after all, the ultimate modernist ideology. But that is not all. These books show what capitalism and the capitalists do with people; they give less attention to what people do to capitalism and capitalists. Huber and Mallon rightly draw attention to Moore’s neglect of the role of the subordinate classes, peasants or otherwise, in determining the direction of capitalist development. Their admonition has not been adopted by the other authors, however. Moreover, by exclusively focusing on the social and economic characteristics of capitalist development these books have tended to ignore its ideological and cultural side. It is interesting to note that this perspective cannot
be considered a direct result of Moore’s work. As Dennis Smith has noted, ‘Moore has made it evident (...) that our explanations of social order and social change can only benefit from systematically taking account of not only structural constraints but also the motivations, perceptions, and choices of human beings.’ Only by focusing on the diverse meanings invested in capitalism and modernity can the variation and pluriformity of modernity become clear.

The diversity of the modern experience is the central issue to be explained by historians and social scientists. Before anything else, it concerns representation and signifying. It is what people make of economic growth, changing labour relations and commodification that gives Latin American modernization its specific meaning. In his provocative critique of developmentalist thinking Arturo Escobar writes: ‘The hypothesis that emerges is no longer that of modernity-generating processes of modernization that operate by substituting the modern for the traditional but of hybrid modernity characterized by continuous attempts at renovation, by a multiplicity of groups taking charge of the multi-temporal heterogeneity peculiar to each sector and country’. The books reviewed here give hints as to these aspects, but they do not pursue their analyses. This criticism may be unfair, for authors can hardly be criticized for something they do not intend to do. These are serious books written by leading scholars in the field. Nevertheless, it is important to stress the limitations of their analytical models. By detaching the cultural and ideological meanings of modernity, these books forego the opportunity to understand the cultural and political pluriformity of the modernization process in Latin America.

Notes

1. The quotes in this article are from: Barrington Moore Jr., Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981). I thank Patricio Silva and Cristobal Kay for thinking with me during the writing of this review article, and Peer Vries for some bibliographical references.
3. Two articles explicitly departing from Moore’s framework are: John H. Coatsworth, ‘Los orígenes del autoritarismo moderno en México’, Foro Internacional, 16:2 (1975); pp. 205-32; and Evelyne Huber Stephens, ‘Capitalist Development and Democracy in South America’, Politics and Society, 17:3 (1989); 281-352. Wiener mentions articles by Leon Campbell and Charles Hale in the 1973 issue of the Latin American Research Review. Later Maurice Zeitlin and Richard Earl Radcliffe used Moore’s theory to explain class relations in Chilean society. Guillermo O’Donnell sometimes mentions Barrington Moore in his publications on Bureaucratic Authoritarianism. These references remain sketchy, however. I have not been able to conduct an exhaustive bibliographical search, but my impression is that Latin American scholars have hardly taken notice of Moore’s work. Lowell Gudmundson suggests – without much proof – that Moore’s work has influenced the research on Central America in the past two decades (in: Huber and Safford, Agrarian Structure and Political Power, p. 151).
4. During the 20th LASA Conference in Guadalajara (Mexico), April 17-19, 1997, three sessions were organized under the title ‘The Other Mirror’. The last session focused on the possible application of Barrington Moore’s ideas to Latin America. After I had finished this review article, I came across a recent attempt to explain political development by using Moore’s ideas: George Reid Andrews and Herrick Chapman (eds), The Social Construction of Democracy, 1870-1990 (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

7. This is also the point Coatsworth makes for the Mexican situation. He writes: ‘[L]a dependencia externa incapacitó al sistema política porfirista para lograr con éxito “una modernización desde arriba”, similar a la seguida por japoneses o alemanes’. Coatsworth, Los orígenes del autoritarismo, p. 207.


Brazil plays a role in Latin American coffee well out of proportion to its already considerable share of the region’s population and economic output. This market will continue to be the driver of regional growth over the forecast period, and will be the target of most foreign interest. Brazil is an anomalous market in ways other than its sheer size, including an unusually fragmented competitive landscape and a very strong preference for fresh coffee over instant. Fresh coffee is driver, but instant still strong. Jorge Larrain’s history of Latin American modernity traces the evolution of this concept with that of identity, the collective cultural essence of Latin Americanness.” Times Higher Education Supplement. Read more. From the Back Cover. In contrast to theories which present modernity and identity in Latin America as mutually excluding phenomena, the book shows their continuity and interconnection. It also traces historically the respects in which the Latin American trajectory to modernity differs from or converges with other trajectories, using this as a basis to explore specific elements of Latin America’s culture and modernity today. The originality of Larrain’s approach lies in the wide coverage and combination of sources drawn from the social sciences, history and literature.