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# Comparative & Historical Sociology

The newsletter of the Comparative and Historical Sociology Section  
of the American Sociological Association.

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*"Comparative sociology is not a special branch of sociology; it is sociology itself in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts."*

—Emile Durkheim

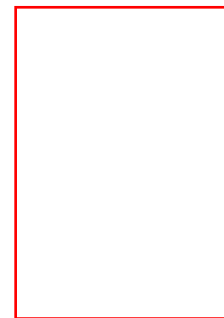
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## BOOK SYMPOSIUM:

### ***Coffee and Power***

by

**Jeffery M. Paige**



Continuing the symposia on important books in the areas of comparative and historical sociology, this issue presents a discussion on Jeffery Paige's *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Harvard University Press, 1997). [Roland Robertson](#) provides a comment and [author Page](#) a reply. The Introductory summary is by the editor, who on this occasion also extends gratitude to all those who helped him more than not in preparing the newsletter.

## Summary

In *Coffee and Power*, Jeffery Paige provides an analysis of the regime transformations in three countries on the basis of a historical-comparative study of the ruling coffee families in Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Situated within the tradition of Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Beacon Press, 1966), Paige argues that the political paths of these three countries more or less parallel the transformations in other nations from conservative authoritarianism, over revolutionary socialism, to bourgeois democracy. Substantiating his claims, Paige focuses primarily on the tensions between two fractions in the coffee elite: the landed agrarian group and the agro-industrial processing sector. For reasons explained in the book, the agrarian fraction Paige associates with authoritarian politics, while the agro-industrial fraction is politically more ambiguous, enabling but not necessitating democratic outcomes.

After describing the 19th-century origins of the coffee elite, Paige focuses on the 1930s, when military rule was established in El Salvador, a personalistic dictatorship in Nicaragua, and (a form of) social democracy in Costa Rica. These different political outcomes are explained with reference to the relative power of the agrarian versus agro-industrial fractions of the coffee elites. Focusing on the crisis of the 1980s, Paige discusses a continuation of earlier developments to argue for the relevance of progress in El Salvador, liberty in Nicaragua, and democracy in Costa Rica. Then, Paige examines how the coffee families supported conservative authoritarianism in El Salvador, revolutionary socialism in Nicaragua, and social democracy in Costa Rica. The coffee elites, it is shown, adopt a narrative that is ideologically liberal and/or neoliberal, although "the unrestricted workings of capitalism" are shown to continue their material path in "creating unprecedented wealth for the few at the expense of the general impoverishment of the many" (p. 136).

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### National Democracy, the Problem of Comparison and the Limitations of Regionalism



by **Roland Robertson**

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The reference point for this brief intervention in the current debate about what Markoff in various publications has appropriately called "waves of democracy" (for example, Markoff 1996) is Jeffrey Paige's *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Paige 1997). It is not my remit to provide a review per se of Paige's analysis of El Salvador, Costa Rica and Nicaragua (with some attention also to Guatemala). Rather, I intend to consider Paige's form of comparative analysis in relation to trends in social science that challenge the canonical

forms of comparison by the rapidly growing interest and empirical moves in the direction of what some have called world society, the world-system or, what may less strongly be designated, as the world as a whole becoming "a single place" (Robertson 1992). To put it sharply, has comparative analysis been rendered redundant by the global—or less comprehensively, the transnational—turn? Very briefly, my answer is in the negative. However, on the other hand, I want to insist that conventional types of comparative analysis are being profoundly affected—indeed, in great need of reconstruction—by the closely connected trends in the direction of reflexive global consciousness, on the one hand, and global connectivity, on the other (Robertson 2000).

Even though Paige's approach to the question of democratization in the Central American countries upon which he concentrates departs from Moore's findings in certain substantive respects, he nonetheless tends to use Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* as something of an exemplar (Moore 1966). But, like Moore in his work, Paige pays little no attention to inter- or cross-national relations even within, let alone beyond, Central America. In fact, apart from interesting pages on the international Communist movement in the worldwide economic crisis of 1929, external circumstances and ideas are neglected, with the exception of a brief comment on transnational capital and the Costa Rican coffee industry. This means that for all of the insightful things that Paige has to say in order to challenge, or at least to revise, the central features of Moore's paradigm, he certainly displays insufficient familiarity in this book with present concerns in social science with internationality, transnationality and globality. The inattention to such matters is all the more egregious because Paige deals in *Coffee and Power* with contiguous countries. In comparing (seventeenth-century) England, (eighteenth-century) France, (nineteenth-century) USA, (nineteenth-century) Japan, and (twentieth-century) China, Moore's tack was, for all of its by-now rather obvious weaknesses (e.g., Axtmann 1993; Crow 1997), rather more defensible than comparisons of geographically adjacent and contemporaneous societies. At least this is so in the absence of an explicit argument that fully justifies lack of concern with extra-societal and inter-state issues.

This is certainly, however, not to deny that in trying to account for what Paige describes as a new model of democratic transition, namely "socialist revolution from below" (Paige 1997: 7), he provides us with a serious challenge to Moore. This does not mean, it should be noted, that El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, or Guatemala are considered to be socialist nation-states; but rather that the impetus for "the rise of democracy," which must surely, with the exception of Costa Rica, be considered as "lite" democracy, in Central America was what Paige describes as socialist, notwithstanding the romantic view held by some that the Sandinistas established something resembling a socialist state. In any case, the fate of the Sandinistan regime was, to put it minimally, affected by various, virtually worldwide, circumstances. And, perhaps to a significantly lesser extent, so was the course of events in other parts of Latin America in the same period so influenced.

Paige certainly does not argue that the "socialist" thrust against dominant elites was autonomously so. Rather, as he makes clear from the outset, the respective "coffee elites" of the three countries upon which he

concentrates backed different ideologies: conservative authoritarianism in El Salvador, social democracy in Costa Rica, and revolutionary socialism in Nicaragua. And, in a subtle insight, Paige maintains that each of the three elites, in effect, selected a single attribute of the Latin American liberal heritage as its core ideational motif: Progress in El Salvador, Liberty in Nicaragua, and Democracy in Costa Rica. In this connection it should be enunciated that Paige does, without directly addressing the issue of culture, pay considerably more attention to what may loosely be described as cultural factors than the referential work of Barrington Moore. But it must be said nonetheless that Paige fails to explore the crucial issue as to the institutional-cultural issues involved in the selection of these motifs from within the traditional conception of liberalism in Central —more generally, Latin— America and how they have resulted in a convergence on the principle of “neo-liberalism.” Paige does not address the global thematization and consolidation of what has commonly come to be called neo-liberalism. But the latter has been identified as the new ideology of global capitalism. It is certainly not unique to any particular region of the world.

Nonetheless, Paige’s attempt to account for these significant differences in elite ideologies, as well as their elite practices, rests on a methodology that should not be criticized. The central problematic is, from his perspective, the shared product of “neo-liberalism and democracy,” in contrast to great differences among the polities of the three principal societies in the early 1980s. Here we have, in spite of the virtues of his analysis, direct access to Paige’s regionalism, his apparent unwillingness to cast a global gaze on Central America. The transition from the Latin American style(s) of liberalism, forged during the 19th century, to what must surely now be labeled as worldwide neo-liberalism (in economic, journalistic discourse, globalization) is conspicuously absent from Paige’s discussion. In other words, he elaborates a narrative of a societal, at best regional, transition from one form of liberalism to another without attention to the inappropriateness of speaking of convergence within Central America. For the transition is to a global ideology.

To repeat, I have by no means attempted to provide a review in the normal sense of Paige’s fascinating book. I have only sought to show how a global, transnational turn could have greatly enhanced an otherwise excellent book.

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## **"Globalization" and Comparative-Historical Research: A Reply to Robertson**



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I am grateful to the editor of the Comparative Historical section newsletter for this opportunity to discuss issues of "globalization" with the scholar who coined the term. Roland Robertson's work still stands out as one of very few serious and systematic theoretical treatments of this current social science buzzword. I think, however, that my analysis of Central America is both more and less global than Robertson thinks. Surely no Central Americanist could ever neglect the global economy. Central American societies have been part of it from their inception. The current social and political structure was formed by the incorporation of the region into the world coffee market in the last great expansion of global capitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (hence my book's title). In fact *Coffee and Power* is organized around the region's response to two crises of global capitalism —the great depression, and the global slowdown after 1973. The book argues that the social structures of Central America have been profoundly transformed by the impact of these two global crises.

One of the principal weaknesses of the current "globalization" discourse in the social sciences is a failure to recognize that capitalism has always been global and a subsequent inability to distinguish the unique features (if there are any) of the current capitalist expansion from those of earlier epochs. Robertson, of course, does attempt to give globalization a precise meaning —the creation of a global society and consciousness. On this score the empirical evidence from Central America simply does not support his contentions. It is perfectly true that neo-liberalism and democracy have emerged as the current justificatory ideology of global capitalism. But as social scientists we have an obligation to test the assumptions of the hegemonic discourse with empirical evidence. In Central America in the periods I studied (1929-1948 and 1979-1992), with

the exception of the revolutionary left, there was little indication of any regional let alone global consciousness. The Costa Rican elite was the most transnational of the three countries coffee elites because El Salvador and Nicaragua had largely resisted the globalization project until the defeat of the left in 1990-1992.

There is little doubt that neo-liberalization is a world wide project conceived by the United States and implemented by the captive bureaucracies of the World Bank and the IMF. I state this at the outset of my analysis. Nevertheless it was warmly embraced by the agro-industrial elites of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua because it suited their economic interests as they saw them and these interests were created by the success of the Central American agro-export economies in the 1960s and 1970s. So there is much more than simply a diffusion of a putative global consciousness at work in the convergence of the three elites around neo-liberalism. The consequences of the neo-liberal expansion have actually been quite varied—revolutionary crisis in Colombia, state dissolution in sub-Saharan Africa, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and fundamentalist nationalism worldwide. The Central America case represents one of many possible responses to neo-liberalism. The global implementation of this ideology is a lot more problematic than Larry Summers would have us believe.

But my book's central theme, as the sub-title suggests and Robertson correctly notes, is the rise of democracy—in Central America and elsewhere. Robertson seems to take the ideology of the Washington consensus at face value—that markets and democracy go hand in hand as part of an emerging global society. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Indeed since my book was written and even since it was published, events in Latin America have demonstrated that the putative worldwide "transition to democracy" is largely smoke and mirrors. Alberto Fujimori seems intent on making himself President of Peru for life. Hugo Chavez has substituted his own brand of populism for the institutions of parliamentary democracy in Venezuela; the Indians of Ecuador have overthrown their own "democratic" government; Colombia slides deeper into the abyss of civil war, and martial law is declared in Bolivia. None of these societies have anything resembling even a minimalist polyarchy let alone a political system that guarantees full juridical rights and citizenship to all. If there is a worldwide transition to democracy it is not apparent in much of Latin America.

In fact, my book's central thesis is that the democratic transitions in Central America are not like the more superficial transitions elsewhere in the world. My postulated route to democracy through socialist revolution from below suggests that real democracy can come about only through an elimination of authoritarian political and agrarian elites and the institutions that support them through a revolutionary popular mobilization. This is precisely what happened in both Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1990s and in Costa Rica in the 1940s. These are not "democracies lite." The largest political party in the Salvadoran National Assembly is now the FMLN (the former guerrillas) and they now control the municipal administrations of almost two-thirds of the national population. More importantly, this party remains capable of enfranchising the poor and dispossessed in a way unknown in much of the rest of Latin America. The Nicaraguans have now contested two reasonably honest national elections with the participation of a similarly militant opposition party. Costa Rica is

the longest lived stable democracy in Latin America and, with the possible exception of India, the entire Third World.

Perhaps, as Robertson hopes, we are in the midst of a transition to a global society based on human rights, democracy and global consciousness. But if so, it will not come about through the expansion of neo-liberal economic doctrines which even in Central America are undermining the prospects for democracy and political stability just as they are worldwide. The evidence from Central America suggests that if a global society emerges it will require a more profound and revolutionary transformation than anything dreamed of in the philosophy of global neo-liberalism. That is the global lesson of the transitions to democracy in Central America. It is much easier to maintain faith in the putative development of a global society if you don't have to keep track of all the messy details of the numerous societies small and large in which people actually live out there lives. My advice to Robertson—think globally but research locally.

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## Sociological Methodology

The new editor of *Sociological Methodology* seeks advice and contributions about all sociological methodologies from the membership of the ASA and its sections.

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