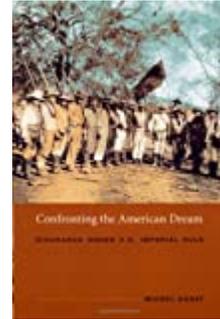




Michel Gobat. *Confronting the American Dream.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. 344 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3647-1.



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The Paradoxes of the Relations between Nicaragua and the United States

During the 1980s, when a Sandinista administration governed Nicaragua, many observers would have loved to have eavesdropped at a family dinner at the home of Violetta Chamorro, the matriarch of one of the most politically prominent families of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 1979 assassination of her husband, the anti-Somoza editor of *La Prensa*, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro Cardinal, was a catalyst for generating widespread support for the Sandinista revolution which overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. Now in the throes of a counterrevolution organized and funded by the Reagan administration and resulting in the Iran-Contra scandal, the children of Pedro Joaquin and Violetta had split political loyalties: Carlos Fernando was editor and chief of the Sandinista daily newspaper *La Barracuda*, which emphasized the dangers of United States imperialism, while his sister Christina edited *La Prensa*, which criticized the Sandinista government. As Michel Gobat's *Confronting the American Dream* reveals, the cause of the divisions within the Chamorro family over the fate of the nation and the U.S. role in shaping

Nicaragua's destiny transcends family dynamics. The schism within the Chamorro family reflects over a century of Nicaraguans' ambivalence toward the role of the United States and the meaning of the North American dream.

Gobat presents the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States as a series of paradoxes. In his opening paragraphs he poses two crucial questions: "Why did so many Nicaraguans embrace U.S. political, economic and cultural forms to defend their own nationality against U.S. impositions? And why did the U.S. occupation of 1912-1933 push Nicaragua's wealthiest and most Americanized elites to turn against the U.S. ideals of modernization which they had valorized for so long, thus transforming them from leading supporter of U.S. imperial rule into some of its greatest opponents?" (p. 2). A primary virtue of *Confronting the American Dream* is Gobat's deft ability to explain these paradoxes by juxtaposing U.S. and Nicaraguan worldviews and how they influenced one another. Often opposing views toward the United States were held by single individuals. While

many conservatives viewed the U.S. as the paradigm of economic progress and modernization, for example, they rejected and feared the "modern North American woman" presented in Hollywood films. The North American economic system stood as the "factory on a hill" but social, religious, and cultural modernity remained a threat.

Godat's close analysis of the period between 1847 and 1933 begins with the California Gold Rush, the transit route from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and the dramatic story of William Walker, the grey-eyed man of destiny. Walker's epic conquest, little known in the United States but well known within Nicaragua, has been the source of North American and Central American novels, poetry, including former Sandinista minister of culture Ernesto Cardenal's "With Walker in Nicaragua," and a joint U.S.-Nicaraguan feature film. For Godat Walker exemplifies the misunderstandings which characterize U.S.-Nicaraguan cross-cultural interchange. Invited into the Central American nation during a civil war by liberals impressed by the economic progress of the United States, the filibuster carried with him a racist ideal of progress via North American domination and potential cultural uplift of inferior Latin Americans.

Gobat's study focuses on the city and department of Granada, the scene of Walker's most destructive rage. Facing defeat by a combined Central American army, Walker ordered his troops to raze the city—the Paris of Central America. As he boarded a ship to retreat across Lake Nicaragua, General Henningsen planted among the smoldering ruins the sign: "Here Stood Granada" Gobat titles his chapter on Walker "Americanization through Violence," echoing the title of Richard Slotkin's classic study of the U.S. *weltanschauung* "Regeneration through Violence." Walker illustrates Gobat's theme of attraction and destruction.

Ironically, Gobat argues that the Walker era reinforced Nicaraguan desire to emulate U.S. progress as a means to safeguard nationality. Over the next decades many of the Nicaraguan elite embraced cosmopolitanism and an agro-export economy based on coffee. This, in turn, led to a rising "bourgeois spirit."

By 1910, however, Nicaragua was a virtual U.S. protectorate. Once again, Gobat clarifies the dilemmas of U.S. imperialism. In order to ensure pro-U.S. governments the North American colossus championed an "exclusionary" government of elites. Yet even within this political framework of the conservative elite's support of U.S.-led economic modernization, social, religious and cultural issues such as allowing evangelical Protes-

tantism and accepting the modern woman proved divisive. By 1912 a civil war precipitated a twenty-year U.S. occupation.

In Gobat's account this period of occupation and "dollar diplomacy" illustrates the paradoxes, ambivalence, and unintended consequences inherent within U.S.-Nicaraguan relations. He deftly weaves diplomatic, economic, social, and cultural history into a historiographical panorama. Realizing the danger of summarizing his complex yet clear analysis, he begins this section of the book with a description of the unique nature of dollar diplomacy when applied to Nicaragua. As opposed to the economic dynamics within other Central American nations which emphasized U.S. ownership, Nicaraguan dollar diplomacy stressed economic control via U.S. dominance of the central bank and the customs service. Still, U.S.-led economic policies directly impacted on Nicaraguan elites, creating both opportunity and anxiety which, Gobat notes, "were often represented as a crisis of masculinity" (p. 149). Equally important, dollar diplomacy had an unintended "democratizing" impact on rural society because small, adaptable Nicaraguan farmers profited by supplying foodstuffs to other Central American nations where U.S.-owned corporations emphasized production of export crops such as bananas and coffee. A rural bourgeoisie began to emerge. Moreover, the drive to impose democracy—defined as clean elections—alienated some conservative elites.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s all these trends coalesced into revolutionary nationalism and actual revolution led by General Augusto Sandino. Seeking a strong stabilizing force the United States organized the *Guardia Nacional*. Like the Sandinista Revolution of the 1970s, Sandino attracted conservative supporters who responded to his revolutionary nationalism vis-a-vis U.S. dominance. Gobat identifies two sources for their sympathies: their opposition to the decentralizing nature of Caudillismo and their hope that Sandino would accept modern corporatism. In the end, the conservative elite realized that, notwithstanding his opposition to the U.S. occupation, Sandino had a different vision of the Nicaraguan social structure than their own. Shortly after the withdrawal of U.S. troops, Sandino was assassinated.

Well researched and clearly written, *Confronting the American Dream* presents a Nicaraguan perspective of U.S. imperial rule. He shows reactions toward the intended and unintended consequences. Americanism had, and has, different definitions and meanings to different sectors of Nicaraguan society. Hence, acceptance and/or

rejection proved selective. A single individual could admire and work to actualize one element of the American dream, such as material prosperity via commercial modernization, while fearing and rejecting other political, cultural, or ideological tenets proclaimed from the city upon a hill, such as gender equality and political democracy.

Gobat's *Confronting the American Dream* joins a

series of books that understands that in its broadest sense, international relations necessitates intercultural dialogue, with neither country dictating the script. Liberal U.S. imperialism in Nicaragua, Gobat concludes, made things worse rather than better. Yet between 1849 and the present, many of the great ideals of the United States, often held so dear and treated so lightly in Washington, continued to inspire.

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