Review from publisher
In Myths of Modernity, Elizabeth Dore rethinks Nicaragua's transition to capitalism. Arguing against the idea that the country's capitalist transformation was ushered in by the coffee boom that extended from 1870 to 1930, she maintains that coffee growing gave rise to systems of landowning and labour exploitation that impeded rather than promoted capitalist development. Dore places gender at the forefront of her analysis, which demonstrates that patriarchy was the organizing principle of the coffee economy's debt-peonage system until the 1950s. She examines the gendered dynamics of daily life in Diriomo, a township in Nicaragua's Granada region, tracing the history of the town's Indian community from its inception in the colonial era to its demise in the early twentieth century. Dore seamlessly combines archival research, oral history, and an innovative theoretical approach that unites political economy with social history. She recovers the bygone voices of peons, planters, and local officials within documents such as labour contracts, court records, and official correspondence. She juxtaposes these historical perspectives with those of contemporary peasants, landowners, activists, and politicians who share memories passed down to the present. The re-conceptualization of the coffee economy that Dore elaborates has far-reaching implications. The Sandinistas mistakenly believed, she contends, that Nicaraguan capitalism was mature and ripe for socialist revolution, and after their victory in 1979 that belief led them to alienate many peasants by ignoring their demands for land. Thus, the Sandinistas' myths of modernity contributed to their downfall.

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Through a micro-history of the Nicaraguan town of Dioromo and the surrounding area in the province of Granada, Elizabeth Dore's book represents as much a work of history as a reflection on lost opportunities. In her introduction and again at the end, Dore ponders on the subject of how Nicaraguan history could have – or should have – informed the Sandinista government that its policies regarding land reform were ahistorical and doomed to failure. In the end, the government alienated the people it purported to serve. Unlike historians whose scholarly efforts remain at a comfortable distance from direct involvement in the lives of those about whom they write, Dore's study of the Nicaraguan peasantry is informed by her earlier political participation as a volunteer in the Sandinista Ministry of Internal Commerce. From there, she
observed how poor peasants became hostile to the Sandinista government, the consequence, she laments, of its misreading of the historical development of land and labour relations in Nicaragua. She takes her experience and the Sandinista flawed experiment as the starting point of a well-researched effort in postcolonial Nicaraguan rural history.

Dore's objectives aim at revising our notions regarding the double-edged effects of liberalism. She interleaves class, gender and racial dimensions to demonstrate that, not only are all three at play in the historical experience, but that they are inseparable; that is, to understand the nature of life in Dioromo over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demands that we observe the differentiated effects of liberal reforms on each of these three dimensions. They shared a combination of immiseration and threatened loss of autonomy. Class, gender and race may be separable theoretically, but the lived experience weaves them into a seamless whole.

Nineteenth-century liberal reforms have also been considered crucial in setting the stage for the advancement of capitalism and export-led economic development based, in much of Latin America, on agricultural production. The case of the Granada region offers a case in point: coffee plantations formed the core of its economic growth. Yet, Dore makes the case for viewing liberal reforms as harmful to the development of a capitalist economy, weakening wealth distribution, worsening labour conditions for the peasantry and, in the end, failing to place Nicaragua on the road to the vital economic development that liberalism was supposed to facilitate.

Dore refracts different aspects of power relations. Within the domain of the political economy, she deals with how liberalism reinforced obstacles to achieving modern economic and social relations. Patriarchy, for example, not swept aside in the wake of modernisation, instead dug in and advanced its objectives. Indeed, notes Dore, patriarchy's nature became more fully articulated, exerting its influences both within the household and in the external relations dealing with regional power brokers.

Finally, Dore treats the contentious nature of social control mechanisms through a detailed study of how peonage underwent change in Dioromo. By linking peonage and patriarchy, she raises patriarchy to the broadest political plane. In this regard, she contributes a cultural turn to both family and regional politics by making a distinction between 'patriarchy from above' and 'patriarchy from below'. The first derives from the hierarchical relationship between landowners, overwhelmingly male and unambiguously dominant, and peons, who formed the bulk of the male work force. The second refers to the widely understood male domination of the peasant household, which also underwent changes resulting from alterations in the extra-household larger environment. Thus, gender politics is seen as part of the fabric of politics at large; indeed, patriarchal principles were codified in the nation's constitutions, illustrating the concept that Nicaragua was a polity of males governing within and beyond the familial domains. She points to the frequent use of family metaphors in the political discourse, typical of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America. But the lasting weakness of the state, Dore contends, served to reinforce locally recognised and codified precepts concerning race, gender and class positions. In the event, the judicial system became the locus of contestation and the institutional guarantor of social control.

Dore illustrates the corrosive power of liberal legislation on gender relations. For example, liberal reforms, she notes, eroded women's rights to family property by eliminating partible inheritance, forcing an undesirable process of individuation. Similarly, liberal anti-clerical legislation served to distance women from the protective mantle of the Church.
The effects of liberalism on landholding in Dioromo are summarised as follows: first, for the majority at the bottom of social scale, it broke the back of male hegemony and ushered in female landholding; second, among the local elite, it restricted control over property; third, among large planters, it led to greater concentration generally and only a few widows became coffee planters of some significance. Further, the effects of land privatisation were highly contradictory, as the impact on men and women differed according to class and ethnicity.

Dore's theoretical armature relies primarily on Marxist tools. In particular, she employs Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (1944) in which he distinguished the role of markets between capitalist and non-capitalist societies. Polanyi rejected the notion that capitalist markets developed through supply and demand because capitalism, forcefully backed by governments through deprivation of land and livelihood, make all 'transactions commercial, every open space a market, every person a consumer, and everything had a price'. Here, Dore does not fully reconcile the notable weakness of the Nicaraguan state with Polanyi's stipulation of the state's responsibility as arbiter of so much of quotidian life in the marketplace. Another important intellectual contributor to Dore's framing of the peasant–landowner relationship in Dioromo is Robert Brenner, who posits that capitalism emerges without modernising such relations, but instead destroys old norms and forges new ones. She also calls on James C. Scott and the invocation by the peasantry of pre-capitalist moral models as resistance strategies to elite domination.

But Dore also takes issue with several authors, including Joan Scott on the nature of gender and politics, and Alan Knight and Arnold Bauer on the characteristics and effects of indebtedness and corvée labour. And she also distances herself from Robert Brenner's insistence on coercion as the state's principal instrument of enforcement, pointing, instead, to the effectiveness of non-forceful means of social and labour control. Finally, she laments the Sandinistas' attempt to rewrite Nicaragua's history, exaggerating its progress toward mature capitalism and thereby spoiling the opportunity to achieve a socialist revolution. In ignoring the rural reality in favour of a project aimed at improving wage and working conditions, Sandinistas lost the key support of the peasantry and hastened their fall from power.

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