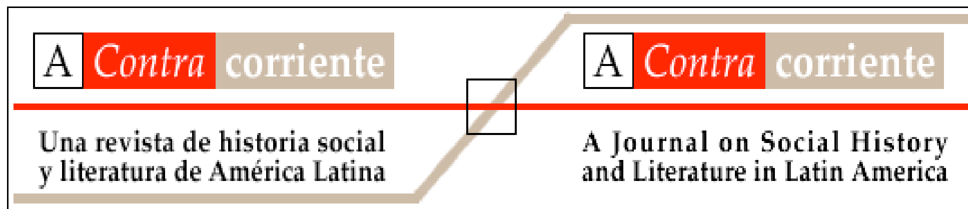

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Reseña/Review

Justin Wolfe, *The Everyday Nation-State: Community and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Nicaragua*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

The Rural Origins of State Autonomy in Nicaragua

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Throughout its republican history, Nicaragua has experienced an extraordinary series of political ruptures. As a result, the country lends itself to comparative studies on the formation of nation-states in Latin America. Scholars taking a comparative approach typically focus on four critical conjunctures in twentieth-century Nicaragua: the 1909-10 shift from Zelaya's nationalistic liberal dictatorship to one of the first U.S. neo-colonial states in the hemisphere; the 1936 rise of the lengthy Somoza

family dictatorship; the revolutionary nation-state project of 1979-90; and the 1990 peaceful transition to a neo-liberal state bent on undoing the revolution's main legacies. Conspicuously absent from this list is Nicaragua's mid-nineteenth century transition from a quasi-stateless political order to what was arguably the most stable liberal-oligarchic state in Central America.[1] This shift might seem anything but dramatic, for it did not result in a significant turnover of the country's political elite. But as Justin Wolfe's new study suggests, the 1857 rupture deserves more scholarly attention, for it produced Nicaragua's perhaps most profound change in state-society relations.

Wolfe's book builds on recent works in Nicaraguan history but also departs from them in innovative ways. With its attention to nation-level processes, *The Everyday Nation-State* complements Arturo Cruz's study of elite efforts to construct a stable "Conservative republic" in late nineteenth-century Nicaragua.[2] Yet in contrast to Cruz, Wolfe also provides a deep analysis of the impact of nation-state formation on local society. To do so, he explores the experiences of rural communities in the politically and economically important prefecture of Granada. This is precisely the region that Julie Charlip and Elizabeth Dore focused on in their revisionist studies of Nicaragua's post-1870s coffee revolution.[3] But if Charlip and Dore examined the coffee revolution's impact on a distinct subregion (Diriamba and Diriomo, respectively), Wolfe casts his geographic net more widely and is thus able to explain apparent contradictions that arise from the juxtaposition of works by Charlip and Dore. In addition, Wolfe deploys a broader analytical lens, for he analyzes not just market-induced changes but also those triggered by state expansion. His analysis of the consolidation of an ethnically homogeneous nation-state project at the cost

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[1] An important exception is Consuelo Cruz's elite-centered *Political Culture and Institutional Development in Costa Rica and Nicaragua* (Cambridge 2005).

[2] Arturo Cruz, *Nicaragua's Conservative Republic, 1858-93* (New York 2002).

[3] Julie Charlip, *Cultivating Coffee: The Farmers of Carazo, Nicaragua, 1880-1930* (Athens 2003); Elizabeth Dore, *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua* (Durham 2006).

of indigenous identities echoes the pioneering work of Jeffery Gould.[4] But if Gould emphasizes the role played by the cultural process of mestizaje, Wolfe stresses structural factors. In the end, however, Wolfe's study mainly departs from the prevailing historiography by exploring how and why Nicaragua's liberal-oligarchic state was deemed a legitimate entity by rural subalterns, who then constituted the vast majority of the population. Or as Wolfe puts it, what is it that led so many peasants and Indians "to see a state as their State" (3)?

Wolfe seeks to answer this critical question by examining the state's everyday negotiations with rural communities. This emphasis on negotiation is, of course, hardly new. Since the 1990s, numerous Latin American historians have used this approach to trace the rise of nation-states in the nineteenth century. But if most historians examine such processes mainly from the perspective of political culture, Wolfe instead deploys a more institutional approach. Indeed, its title notwithstanding, the book seems to reflect more the approach of Max Weber than that of scholars of everyday life such as Henri Lefebvre and Alf Lüdtke. That said, Wolfe's study also differs significantly from most Weberian-inspired works on Latin America, for it focuses not on state institutions per se, but on their complex ties with rural communities. Thanks to this distinct analytical perspective, Wolfe's book sheds important light not just on Nicaraguan history but also on the rural origins of state autonomy (a term he does not use). Above all, it convincingly argues that state officials' adroit management of conflicts among peasants, Indians, and large landowners allowed them to create a state that rural subalterns came to view as their own.

In substantiating this argument, Wolfe draws heavily on the rich yet hitherto underutilized material held in Granada's municipal archive and its property registry. Although the municipal archive holds sources from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s, its richest holdings pertain to the years 1860s-80s, when Granada was home to the country's most important prefecture and when the Nicaraguan state consolidated itself in the region's

[4] Jeffrey Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880-1965* (Durham 1998).

countryside. These holdings are not only very detailed, but also varied. They include correspondence of state and municipal officials, private petitions, court cases, census material, and statistical information on rural properties. Combined with the land and credit data held in the property registry, these holdings provide an extraordinary window into rural life in late-nineteenth century Nicaragua.

Wolfe's analysis of community-state relations is organized more along thematic lines than chronological ones. The book begins with a chapter on the elite ideologies that underpinned the late-nineteenth-century nation-state project. He focuses on two "proto-nationalist" ideologies that emerged in the post-independence era but that would not be truly implemented until the second half of the nineteenth-century. The first is what Wolfe calls patriarchal nationalism, a "seemingly all-encompassing discourse on national membership, rights, and responsibilities" that provided the basis for national unity (29). The second is what the Nicaraguan historian Frances Kinloch has called "cosmopolitan nationalism."[5] This ideology was rooted in elites' firm belief that the projected inter-oceanic canal would be Nicaragua's ticket to "liberal modernity." As Wolfe stresses, the implementation of both forms of nationalism was long impeded by rural communities, which fiercely defended their autonomy against encroaching state institutions. The period often known as the "epoch of anarchy" culminated in the 1855-57 rule of the U.S. filibusters led by William Walker. And it was this unprecedented threat to their very survival that pushed Nicaraguan elites to overcome their internal differences and create a strong nation-state capable of resisting foreign intervention. Elites realized that such a state project could only succeed if it were deemed legitimate by the majority of the population.

In the rest of the book, Wolfe explores how rural communities came to embrace the central state as a legitimate political entity. Wolfe's analysis should put to rest the stubborn myth that a liberal order did not emerge in Nicaragua until the dictatorship of the Liberal José Santos Zelaya (1893-1909). Like other recent studies, Wolfe's book clearly demonstrates that the

[5] Frances Kinloch, *Nicaragua: Identidad y cultura política (1821-1858)* (Managua 1999).

Conservative-dominated regimes of 1857-93 not only embraced liberalism and ruled in coalition with the Liberal party, but also established the foundations of a modern state apparatus. It was thus under Conservative rule that the Nicaraguan state carried out wide-reaching liberal reforms that dramatically transformed its relations with rural communities.

Wolfe traces this transformation by first considering the rural expansion of two institutions critical to the state's survival: tax agencies and the military. In doing so, he provides a wealth of data on the dramatic increase in state finances and on the distinct ways that municipal and state taxes burdened rural peoples. He delineates how state officials, eager to avoid a repeat of the pre-1857 popular rebellions, frequently curbed the efforts of rural municipalities to overtax the poor. At the same time, Wolfe shows how the state used its tax agencies and coercive apparatus to exert greater control over the rural population. For example, the state charged its police agents to enforce its monopoly over the production of *aguardiente,* which was a lucrative undertaking for many non-elite producers. But in combating wide-scale contraband production, the state turned many law-abiding citizens into criminals. For Wolfe, then, the state's efforts to enforce its aguardiente monopoly inadvertently subverted its goal of creating a more inclusive nation-state. In the end, many local state officials did not fully enforce the state's aguardiente monopoly—not so much because of their belief in political inclusion as due to their fear of provoking rural unrest.

In chapter three, Wolfe analyzes the key role that state institutions played in privatizing the most important resource of rural communities: land. After explaining the post-1857 shift in elites' valorization of international commerce to that of agriculture, Wolfe shows how the Conservative-dominated governments of the 1860s-80s used state resources to promote the agro-export industry. As elsewhere in Latin America, these governments carried out large-scale infrastructural projects. They also implemented laws and created state institutions designed to promote private land ownership. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, Wolfe argues that the state promoted not just large-scale commercial farms, but also smaller ones as well. In fact, he goes so far as to

claim that for late nineteenth-century Nicaragua "the rise of a smallholding class ... is at the heart of the process of nation-state formation" (p. 81).

Wolfe breaks new ground by documenting the uneven changes in land tenure that occurred in the region of Granada. Unlike most other scholars, he explores changes not just in the coffee sector, but also in all areas of Granada's diverse rural economy (though by differentiating between small-, medium-, and large-size holdings, his analysis does not distinguish between land used to produce lucrative cash crops, such as coffee, and land cultivated for less-profitable basic foodstuffs like corn). Wolfe's statistical analysis reveals how in some communities land came to be concentrated in the hands of a few, while in others much land came to be held by small- and medium-scale producers. In explaining these divergent outcomes, Wolfe points to differences in communities' market orientation (and thus crop specialization); in their access to physical resources (including water); and in their broader history of ethnic relations. But he also stresses how these differences resulted from communities' different relationship with the central state. Indeed, Wolfe argues that the majority of ordinary Nicaraguans with access to land "owed their hold on that land to the state, and at times of crisis they looked less and less to community institutions to adjudicate their claims, turning instead to state institutions—be they police, courts, or prefects" (120).

Wolfe's nuanced analysis of the key role that state officials and institutions played in the rise of a smallholding peasantry is his book's outstanding contribution. In particular, it helps us better understand why rural peoples could come to view the state as "their State." But Wolfe is careful to point out that the state-sponsored rise of a smallholding peasantry also led to the "almost silent growth in the everyday influence of the state on local communities and their members, in effect diminishing both the power of these communities and their ability to sustain local identities" (120). In other words, state power and legitimacy expanded at the cost of communal autonomy and identity.

Chapter four further develops this tension in state-community relations by tracing state efforts to manage rural labor relations.

Nicaragua's landed elite faced great difficulties in obtaining laborers because of the country's relatively low population density and due to the great availability of land for common Nicaraguans. Various scholars have examined Nicaragua's so-called labor question. But if they have tended to focus on laborers' relations with either the state or landlords, Wolfe instead explores the tense relationship between landlords and state officials. In doing so, he reveals how state officials occasionally defended the rights of rural laborers, thus antagonizing landlords. Such state intervention reinforced state authority and autonomy in rural Granada. It also went hand-in-hand with the expansion of free labor at the cost of debt peonage—a development that did not occur as forcefully in more frontier-like regions such as Matagalpa.

Wolfe also sheds new light on state-community relations by showing how local struggles over the meaning of labor strengthened rural subalterns' identification with the nation-state. This struggle was so acute precisely because after 1857 citizenship became tied to landownership while "laborer" became a marker for non-citizen and, therefore, subject to forced labor on private farms and public projects. It was not until the Zelaya dictatorship that the Nicaraguan state sought to deny citizenship status to the vast class of smallholders. For much of the late nineteenth century, then, rural subalterns constantly struggled to defend their identity as farmers (*agricultores*) and as citizens. This was especially the case for members of indigenous communities, as *ladinos* (non-Indians) had long defined Indians as laborers. As Wolfe neatly shows, Indians' defense of smallholder status was often supported by state officials. But if such a defense increased their ties with the nation-state, it came once again at the cost of indigenous identity and autonomy.

State intervention in ladino-indigenous relations is the main focus of the book's last chapter. And it is here where the reader gets the best sense of how the state's acute management of local struggles enabled it to consolidate its power over the countryside. As other scholars have shown, conflicts between Nicaragua's indigenous and ladino communities intensified in the late nineteenth century largely due to ladino efforts to: a) de-Indianize Nicaraguan nationality in favor of mestizo homogeneity; and

b) expand their control over indigenous labor and land resources. Wolfe sheds new light on both processes. For example, he illuminates the key role that census taking played in the creation of a mestizo national identity.

Above all, however, Wolfe complicates our understanding of the rise of a "Nicaragua mestiza" by revealing that state officials did not inherently support ladino municipalities in their conflicts with their indigenous neighbors. In fact, until the 1880s, the Nicaraguan state felt more threatened by the aggressive efforts of ladino communities to expand their power than by the existence of indigenous communities. As Wolfe shows, state officials sought to strengthen their authority by funneling rural conflicts through state institutions and by using weaker indigenous communities to curb the power of ladino municipalities. Thanks to this strategy the state came to be seen as a legitimate broker by many indigenous communities. Yet because the state sided at times with ladino municipalities, it also enjoyed certain legitimacy among rural ladinos. So even if the post-1857 state did promote a ladino-based nationality, the implementation of this project in rural Granada was anything but a seamless process.

Wolfe also shows that state power was strengthened by a hitherto unrecognized shift in indigenous strategy that occurred in the 1880s. Drawing on Paul Gilroy, Wolfe argues that indigenous communities shifted from the politics of transfiguration to one of fulfillment. In other words, Nicaraguan Indians abandoned their efforts to have the state tolerate their culture for a strategy that sought to "force ladino society to live up to the principles and promises of their nation-state discourse, most importantly justice and equality before the law" (177). Once again, Wolfe provides telling examples from rural Granada to document this shift. But did the 1880s shift also diminish indigenous access to citizenship, as many would assume? To answer this important question, Wolfe analyzes unpublished municipal returns from the 1883 census in rural Granada. His findings reveal that, although many Indians were indeed excluded from citizenship, in some towns their rates of citizenship could be as high as 95 percent. Wolfe persuasively argues that Indians' uneven access to citizenship depended greatly on whether a community was dominated by subsistence

or commercial agriculture. In the latter case, ladinos often had come to control municipal politics and thus possessed a greater capacity to disenfranchise Indians.

The precise causes of this shift in indigenous politics remain unclear, however. Wolfe's analysis emphasizes two structural factors: a) the post-1870s boom in commercial agriculture, which weakened the cultural and material bases of indigenous identity; and b) the consolidation of state power that made state officials less dependent on indigenous communities and thus more bent on imposing their ladino-based nation-state project. But at various moments, Wolfe's book also suggests that this shift had much to do with a key historical event: the failed indigenous uprisings of 1881, which were centered in Matagalpa but also involved indigenous communities closer to the country's main urban centers, especially León and Masaya. Several thousand Indians participated in Central America's largest rural rebellion of the late nineteenth century—an uprising that, as Jeffrey Gould has shown, was carried out in the name of an "Indian nation." The surprising ease with which the state crushed these uprisings likely led state officials to realize just how strongly they controlled the countryside. Perhaps this realization, more than any other factor, prompted state officials to abandon their ambivalent defense of indigenous autonomy in favor of an aggressive campaign to "ladinize" the nation—a campaign that surely made it more difficult for indigenous communities to maintain their "politics of transfiguration."

Another political aspect that awaits more research is the role that caudillo networks played in the post-1857 consolidation of Nicaragua's nation-state. Wolfe is absolutely right to criticize traditional Nicaraguan historiography for viewing much of the country's modern history as little more than a struggle among prominent caudillos who wielded seemingly absolute power over the rural poor. In correcting this simplistic vision, Wolfe not only uncovers the manifold ways that rural communities helped shape the formation of the modern Nicaraguan state; he also stresses the autonomous role played by state institutions. In doing so, he sometimes identifies state officials who dealt with rural communities. As it turns out, some of them belonged to families (e.g. Urbina and Vivas) that headed

influential caudillo networks in rural Granada. The reader cannot help wonder whether these networks played as critical a role in consolidating the Nicaraguan state as was the case, for example, with the Yucatecan networks in Porfirian Mexico as discussed by Allen Wells and Gilbert Joseph.[6] Wolfe's book also leaves one wondering about the role that local elections might have played in this process. The plethora of "complaints, letters, investigations, and reports on elections and voting rights" (74) that Wolfe found in Granada's municipal archive suggest that local elections were a key component of rural political culture and might have thus helped consolidate the state's legitimacy. A closer examination of this vibrant electoral culture would likely illuminate the still murky connections between caudillo politics and state-formation.

In sum, Wolfe's book makes an important contribution to Nicaraguan historiography by providing a nuanced and heavily researched analysis of the rural origins of the Nicaraguan state. Hopefully Wolfe's book will lead comparative scholars interested in Latin American nation-state formation to incorporate Nicaragua's 1857 conjuncture into their analysis. Such a comparative approach would allow us to better pinpoint the international and domestic factors that enabled Nicaraguans to carry out one of the region's most dramatic transitions from virtual statelessness to state stability.

[6] Allen Wells and Gilbert Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatán, 1876-1915* (Stanford 1996).