

# COFFEE, LAND AND RACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

*New Books Explore the Divergent  
Paths of El Salvador and Costa Rica*

By Robert W. Thurston

ANYONE WHO HAS TRAVELED TO El Salvador and Costa Rica recently has surely sensed significant differences between these two countries. El Salvador is poorer, rougher, and seems more dangerous. Costa Rica is more tourist and coffee buyer friendly, has better roads and facilities, and is wealthier. El Salvador is plagued by gangs, some of which have roots in the United States. These differences began to appear by the late 19th century, despite the facts that the countries are similar in topography and population size, are located close to each other, and have long histories of growing coffee.

Two readable new books provide numerous insights about coffee in El Salvador and Costa Rica and why those countries appear to be so different to this day. *The Saints of Progress* is about land and politics in the Tarrazú Valley, where districts and towns are all named after saints. Progress, despite occasional outbreaks of violence, has characterized Costa Rica and fed its people's pride. *Coffeeland* focuses on James Hill, his wealth and power in El Salvador in the early 20th century, and his exploitative, even lethal labor practices. During the 20th century, the country exploded twice into mass violence.

Before reviewing the books and their stories of land, labor and race, a few figures referenced in the CIA's *World Factbook* are in order.

**Population (2020 estimate for both countries):**

- El Salvador: 6,481,102
- Costa Rica: 5,097,988

**Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita:**

- El Salvador: \$8,000 (No. 129 in the world)
  - Costa Rica: \$16,900 (No. 85 in the world)
- (Highest globally is Luxembourg at \$113,197. The U.S. figure is \$55,761, ranking 23rd in the world.)*

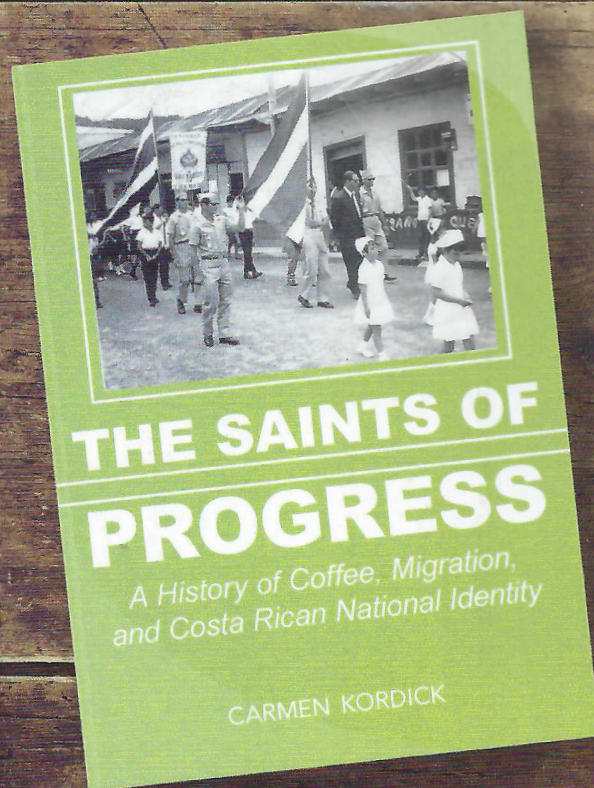
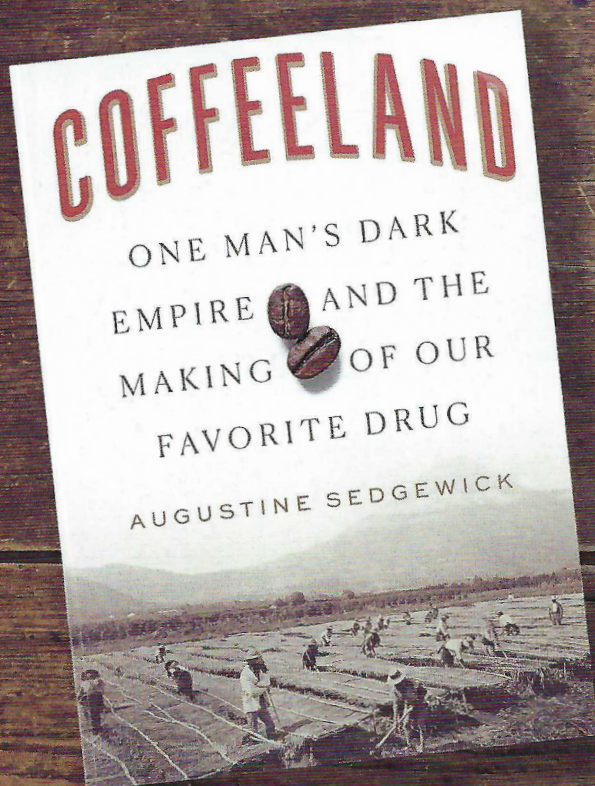
**Agriculture's role in GDP:**

- El Salvador: 12 percent
- Costa Rica: 5.5 percent

*(This metric is a good predictor of a country's poverty. Compare Afghanistan at 44.3 percent to The Netherlands at 1.2 percent.)*

The most important and complicated numbers for comparative purposes and for understanding these new books have to do with race. Using the countries' own terminology, 86.3 percent of the Salvadoran people are "mestizo," meaning of mixed Spanish and Indigenous descent. Then there is "white" at 12.7 percent, "Amerindian" at 0.2 percent, and "Black" at 0.01 percent.





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For “Ticos,” as the people of Costa Rica call themselves, the categories change: “White or mestizo” comprises 83.6 percent, “mulatto” (elsewhere considered an ugly word; it derives from the Spanish for mule) 6.7 percent, Indigenous 2.4 percent, and “Black of African descent” 1.1 percent. Then there are the mysterious “none” and “unspecified” categories at 2.9 and 2.2 percent respectively. (Bolivia, according to the U.N., has the highest percentage in Latin America of Indigenous people in its population, 62.2 percent.)

Race is an idea that often leads to endless debate and difficulty. For example, what is the Spanish “race”? It would include genetic

material from Gothic tribes, Romans, Arabs and Jews. Into the early 20th century, race meant something like ethnicity does today. “Anglo-Saxons” long considered the Spanish to be a lower, darker, enfeebled race, but today we call the Spanish and their direct descendants white.

More important in El Salvador and Costa Rica than the figures on race—sloppy numbers for a sloppy word—is the way people think of and present themselves to each other and the world. Ticos, as Carmen Kordick makes clear in *The Saints of Progress*, typically consider themselves to be white. She also refers to some Ticos as “Hispanics.” While “mestizo” does not necessarily have





A coffee seedling in El Salvador. Photo courtesy of Finca Majahual

negative connotations in Latin America, “white” generally holds higher status. Advertisements in both countries usually portray white people.

From the many interviews Kordick conducted in Costa Rica, an unfortunate tone emerges: a pride in whiteness and disdain for darker-skinned folk. The traditional view of Costa Rican history, not much emphasized by Kordick, is that Indigenous peoples had all but died out from disease before Hispanic settlers moved into the interior. *The Saints of Progress* relates the story of the Cascante family, who settled in the Tarrazú region in 1824. Finding no one already living there, the Cascantes cleared land and set up a hostel for travelers. In fact, Indigenous people, other than the migrant Ngöbe-Buglé, do not figure in Kordick’s book. It seems that we must return to older ideas that racial homogeneity facilitated the development of democracy in Costa Rica. Because people looked alike and spoke Spanish as their native language, they felt a kind of commonality in the 19th century and after,

even if, as Kordick suggests, it was based to a large extent on shared poverty. Such cohesion eluded other Latin American states.

Kordick finds that class relations in Costa Rica were “relatively stable” from the 1890s until 1948. The country adopted universal male suffrage in 1902, and by the mid-1920s, Costa Rica was an “effective democracy.” The elite of the Tarrazú Valley helped in a sense; the leading families were less interested in acquiring land than in processing and exporting coffee. One man, Tobias Umaña Jiménez, became the sole *beneficiador* (owner of a wet mill) by the 1930s. He amassed considerable wealth and power in the area; at the same time, his chosen pursuit allowed some families to escape debt and buy small farms, while others never fell into his clutches. To this day, Kordick shows, remittances from Tico emigrants in the United States have allowed families at home to continue to grow coffee. The small *cafetelero* is still Costa Rica’s iconic figure.





A coffee farm in Costa Rica. Photo by Kelly Stewart

Because the country was a democracy and people felt a common identity, a series of reforms was adopted in the 1930s and '40s. These included a minimum wage for agricultural workers, "social guarantees" and a labor code. Often violated in practice, these laws still provided some protection for poorer Ticos and bolstered a sense of progress in the country.

Then, despite the democracy, came the revolution of 1948. The details are messy; suffice it to say that Kordick stresses a feeling in the Tarrazú Valley, where the fighting began and where most casualties occurred, that men were being disenfranchised. The whole revolt lasted about six months and resulted in 1,000 to 2,000 deaths. In the years following 1948, there was no conservative reaction. The new Costa Rica government abolished the armed forces and continued to implement reforms.

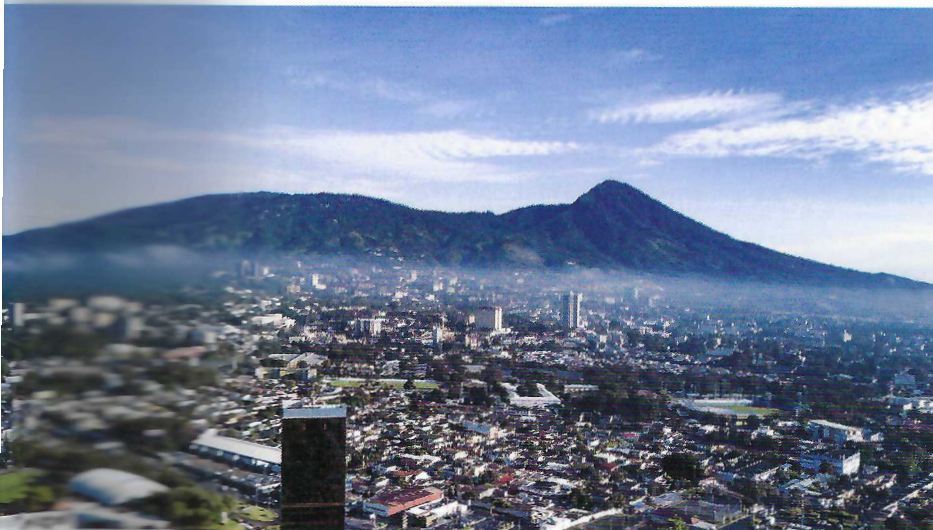
Kordick argues that Costa Rica has been able to remain relatively stable and peaceful since the revolution because the reforms were enacted in a period of anti-fascism in the 1930s and '40s. Yet the

rebels and the new government still took care to oust communists from the political scene. If the reforms had come 10 years later, Kordick maintains, the United States might have intervened to halt them, as it did in Guatemala in 1954.

Sedgewick's *Coffeeland* takes a different approach to coffee and history. It aims less to tell the story of a specific region or country than to make universal statements about agricultural capitalism and exploitation. Sedgewick first paints a picture of a near-Edenic land before coffee arrived. Europeans who went to El Salvador in the mid-19th century were struck by "the absence of all extreme poverty," as one traveler put it. Then coffee arrived in the 1870s. James Hill, the arch-villain of the story, immigrated from Manchester, England, in 1889. Sedgewick describes the truly awful conditions of the day in Manchester, invoking a broad indictment of capitalism's labor practices.

Once Hill was in El Salvador, and due in significant measure to his efforts, the country became an





A recent photo of San Salvador, El Salvador. Photo by H-Media / iStock

agricultural Manchester. As late as 1950, coffee accounted for more than 90 percent of exports. Life had been transformed; the country's infamous oligarchy of "14 families," of which Hill's was the leader, controlled the economy and politics. Eighty percent of the country's children were malnourished.

The upper class in El Salvador acquired land on a grand scale. But how to get people to work on coffee farms for little pay? Well, "what was needed to harness the will of the Salvadoran people to the production of coffee, beyond land privatization, was the plantation production of hunger itself." Brutal punishments or death awaited those who stole food, even a single avocado, from the plantations. Control of land and food helped create a "culture of violence," which included retaliation by workers. In 1912, the government created the National Guard, which took over much of the burden of directly controlling labor. Growers could request the presence of the Guard, especially in harvest season.

Any time James Hill found a fruit tree or tomato plant on his land, he ordered it destroyed. As coffee reached the highlands and became a monoculture there, the working people were reduced to eating tortillas and beans. Hill's managers doled out meager portions to pickers and others, having calculated the minimum needed to keep workers alive and reasonably effective. Hill bought food on international markets when it was cheap and sent it out to his plantations.

Race, Latin American style, played a prominent role in exploitation. In 1927, an American visitor, Arthur Ruhl, observed that the "large, hardworking, mixed-race peasant class, if not so 'white' and 'democratic' as Costa Rica's, was neither so 'Indian' and difficult as Guatemala's." On El Salvador plantations, Indigenous workers were called "mozos," a nasty term that referred to their supposed laziness, passivity and lack of ambition. This was the white elite's traditional view. But as the Depression set in, sinking prices for coffee and wages for work, the *mozos* had had enough.

Various leftist organizers crossed El Salvador and organized a wave of strikes in December 1931. For the first time, planters faced broad resistance; some were killed. Reaction from the right was swift and horrific. British and American officials smelled communism in the strikes; the Canadians showed their support for repression by sending two warships. *La Matanza*, the slaughter, began. The El Salvador government borrowed money from banks to finance a war against the peasants, especially the Pipil group. Sedgewick writes, "Indian identity was a death sentence," and "Indian" became synonymous with "communist." Perhaps 30,000 people died, most machine-gunned by government forces. Taking a cue from Kordick's analysis of Costa Rica, we may wonder if reforms there would also have been crushed had they started a decade *earlier* than they did.

In any event, El Salvador became a military dictatorship sustained by coffee. Little changed before civil war broke out in 1979. This time, a better organized communist party developed extensive ties among coffee workers, which made the United States act more aggressively than in the 1930s. American money, \$1-2 million per day, financed death squads in El Salvador. The war ended in 1993 after some 75,000 people, many of them Indigenous, had died. Land reform—paid for in blood—then broke up most of the large estates. Since the war, economic progress has been slow but reasonably steady. Still, crime and overcrowding, with violence toward women that is all too typical for the region, are constant problems.

Sedgewick has an ambitious agenda besides telling the fairly well-known story of violence on coffee farms





Overlooking San José,  
Costa Rica. Photo by  
travelview/Adobe Stock

in El Salvador. Coffee played a central role in shaping the divide between developed industrial societies and the rest of the world from roughly 1880 to 1950. Coffee, he writes, is “one of the most important commodities in the history of global inequality.” Research on food and calories, the study of energy in the 19th century, the discovery of caffeine, the American time and motion expert Frederick W. Taylor, William Ukers of coffee book fame, and Karl Marx all appear in vivid passages. But only rarely does Sedgewick connect such topics and figures to James Hill and coffee in El Salvador. Still, with its quick review of coffee history and introduction to background material, *Coffeeland*, published by an energetic commercial press, will reach a much wider pool of readers than any tightly focused study of coffee will attract.

Sedgewick and Kordick provide a wealth of new detail on critical aspects of coffee, life and labor, and violence in their chosen countries. The differences still evident today between El Salvador and Costa Rica become much more memorable in the authors’ hands. Both books are valuable.

Yet coffee should not be seen as a villain or hero in these lands; consider the wider and more depressing connections between cotton, slavery and imperialism, for example. It isn’t so much our favorite beans and

beverage that have been to blame for mass exploitation and murder, or for that matter for democracy. What does emerge as critical factors are patterns of land ownership and, once more, concepts of race in Central America. Costa Rica has had fewer problems in these regards than other countries of the region; Guatemala has been most deeply affected by issues of land and race, while El Salvador is only one step higher.

If coffee has not really been the key problem, it will also not be the solution to poverty and violence. Coffee today amounts to less than 2 percent of El Salvador exports by value, according to my calculations using World Trade Organization data. Costa Rica émigrés have contributed to north-south wealth sharing; it would be wonderful to see a better, broader plan to accomplish that from the U.S. border with Mexico to Tierra del Fuego.



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