

*Environment Under Fire: Imperialism and the Ecological Crisis in Central America.* By DANIEL FABER. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993. Photographs. Maps. Tables. Notes. Index. x, 301 pp. Cloth, \$36.00. Paper, \$16.00.

This book argues that the environmental ailments besetting Central America are the work of capitalism and imperialism, particularly as embodied in the policies of the United States. The author, a sociologist at Northeastern University, seeks to add ecological degradation to the list of evils visited on Central Americans by North Americans. His information is derived from secondary scholarly literature and journalism. His prescription is that North Americans must unite to reverse U.S. policies. The argument has considerable merit—much more than the book.

Faber undermines a potentially strong case with frequent hyperbole and inaccuracies. His book will persuade no one who is not already convinced, nor will it impress historians. Readers of the *HAHR* will be disappointed by the historical chapter. Faber believes that serious environmental problems began only with the Spanish conquest (p. 15); he does not consider Mayan history from the ecological point of view. The impact of the sharp population drop in the sixteenth century receives short shrift in favor of the far less extensive degradation derived from the colonial plantation economy. Despite accepting a pre-Columbian population for Central America of 10 million to 13 million, Faber asserts that plantations (colonial and modern) replaced “pristine” ecosystems. (“Pristine” appears approximately 30 times throughout the book to describe the ecosystems before capitalist impact). In general, Faber’s history attributes virtually all ecological change to external forces, particularly to U.S. policy. That is an exaggeration.

Faber’s history is also confused. Survivors of the sixteenth-century depopulation were not all “enslaved” (p. 42). In 1700 the Spanish Hapsburgs were not “pre-Counter-Reformation” (p. 19). It was not the case in the mid-nineteenth century that “most of the unclaimed national lands in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua became planted in coffee groves” (p. 23). *Encomendero* does not, in the colonial Spanish American context, mean *commissioner* (p. 19), nor is a *finca* a landholder (p. 89).

While Faber is, I believe, essentially correct in his emphasis on the ecologically corrosive effects of the modern export economy (most of the book concerns the 1980s), defects overwhelm the book’s message. Overstatement and imprecision especially afflict the treatment of the lamentable U.S. role. Faber confuses intention with byproduct: “The United States is also at war with nature in Central America” (p. 4). The author regards the book as “theoretically sophisticated and empirically detailed” (p. 7), but it is not well informed. Faber’s climatology and evolutionary biology are misguided: Central America’s “constant rainfall” has not “accelerated evolutionary processes” (p. 13). His botany and demography are no better: sugarcane and timber are neither fruit nor vegetable (p. 43); 2.8 percent is not the world’s highest population growth rate (p. 75). His geomorphology is

misleading: a modest erosion rate (270 to 425 metric tons per square mile) and one roughly five hundred times as great are both termed “incredible” (pp. 66, 143). His economic logic and arithmetic are miscalculated: a decline of 11.7 percent in Nicaragua’s gross domestic product between 1987 and 1990 could not be a 21.5 percent decline per capita (p. 181)—that would require a near doubling of population in three years.

Many of these mistakes probably reflect only carelessness and lack of editorial oversight. The syntax and spelling suggest as much. So do several verbatim repetitions of extended phrases (pp. 4 and 31; 49 and 86; 248 and 253). But the hyperbole reflects deeper problems: an unfirm grasp of history and a simplistic view of cause and effect. The Monthly Review Press has published some excellent works on Latin America (such as Manuel Moreno Fraginals’ book *The Sugarmill* [1976]); but this book is not among them.

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