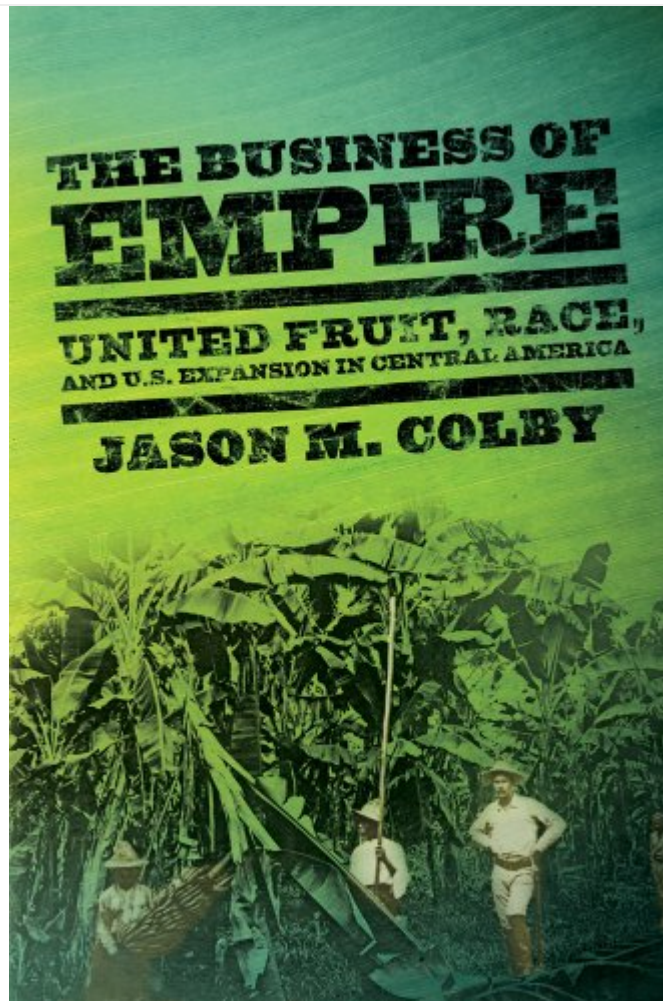


{essays in history}

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The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America



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Reviewed Work(s)

The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America. By Jason M. Colby (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). Pp. xi, 274. Cloth, \$45.00.

Jason Colby opens *The Business of Empire* with a 1909 strike against the United Fruit Company (UFCO) raging in Guatemala. Provoked by company officials using racial slurs and slashing pay, British West Indians spearheaded the protest, and a peaceful resolution resulted thanks to discussions between Guatemalan and British officials. For historians who have relied upon traditional accounts of U.S. government officials' actions and interventionist policies in Central America, this event would have been characterized merely as the result of U.S. racial ideology and Jim Crow initiatives. Colby, however, provides a more nuanced treatment of this event. A significant addition to the rising field of international and transnational history, *The Business of Empire* ties together race, labor, business culture, U.S. imperialism, Latin American anti-Americanism (or rather, anti-Yankeeism) and Central American history to provide a vivid account of the rise of the UFCO in Guatemala and Costa Rica, and the actions taken by British West Indians and Hispanics to both resist and accommodate the UFCO.

As Colby succinctly outlines in his introduction, the transnational methodology allows historians to apply new analyses and reveal previously overlooked dimensions of Latin American foreign relations. The vast majority of works on the UFCO have focused upon its relationship with the U.S. government and U.S. officials.^[1] It is only recently that historians have probed into the intricate relationships forged by the UFCO and other transnational firms in Latin America.^[2] In the Costa Rican National Archive, Colby uncovered a massive collection of documents regarding the UFCO's operations in Costa Rica. With new source materials and a transnational methodology, *The Business of Empire* argues that, operating as a transnational firm in Guatemala and Costa Rica, the UFCO ended up positioning itself between competing racial ideologies. Rather than submitting to a Jim-Crow-like labor regime, British West Indians and Hispanics contested

and shaped the UFCO's operations and the spread of U.S. imperial culture.

In the mid- to late nineteenth century, Americans first arrived in Central America through private enterprises, not through official governmental channels. Guatemalan and Costa Rican Liberals sought to promote railroads, commercial agriculture, and other such operations in order to 'modernize' their countries and compete in the international arena. In this way, the UFCO became a leading banana firm. In Costa Rica and Guatemala, UFCO officials utilized British West Indian laborers and drew upon U.S. racial ideologies in denigrating these black English-speaking peoples. However, West Indians formed unions, protested UFCO operations, and organized strikes in Costa Rica in 1910 and Guatemala in 1909.

As a transnational firm, the UFCO reorganized its labor system by recruiting more Hispanic workers. In the banana enclaves, UFCO officials separated black and Hispanic laborers, placed black managers over subordinate black workers, and exacerbated the racial tensions between British West Indians and Hispanics. The firm's policy of favoring black workers at the expense of Hispanics fomented animosities and divided the firm's labor force. Initially, such a policy favored the UFCO. Anti-black sentiments helped the UFCO use Hispanic strikebreakers, 'remove' West Indian labor agitators, and prevent class solidarity among its workers.

However, Colby finds that the UFCO found itself facing a new challenge. Its segmentation of West Indian and Hispanic laborers had encouraged racial anxieties among Hispanics to such an extent that Hispanic nationalists in the 1920s began demanding the expulsion of all black workers. Hispanic unions and politicians demanded that the UFCO exclude black workers and reframe its labor policies to favor Spanish-speaking workers. With the turbulent economic conditions of the 1930s, the UFCO found itself acknowledging these Hispanic nationalists who demanded better contracts and immigration restrictions. As a transnational firm, the UFCO had utilized multiple racial ideologies to divide its workers and prevent class solidarity. As a transnational firm, the UFCO also discovered that it could not dictate the long-term effects of anti-black racism and Hispanic nationalism. The UFCO thus lost the very labor system it had created; in addition, it inadvertently contributed to a

rise in anti-American (anti-Yankee) sentiment and Hispanic nationalism that would continue to target the UFCO over the coming decades.

Due to his international framework and transnational methodology, Colby's work is an essential addition to numerous historiographies. His study of how Hispanics and British West Indians limited the reaches of US racial ideologies and developed an anti-American (anti-Yankee) ideal adds to contemporary analyses of US imperialism. His focus on British West Indian immigrants in the UFCO's banana enclaves highlights both the actions of a group now being reincorporated into Central American history as well as that group's interactions with British officials, UFCO employers, and Hispanic employees.^[3] Most importantly, his conclusion that Hispanic nationalists opposed the UFCO's segmentation of West Indian-Hispanic labor provides a remarkable way to interpret Central American nationalism and U.S.-Latin American foreign relations. Because Colby's work speaks to a range of subjects, *The Business of Empire* is an invaluable addition to international and transnational history.

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[1] See the works by Lester Langley, Thomas Schoonover, Emily Rosenberg, Ivan Musicant, and Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer.

[2] One can see this trend in the new works on Latin American governments, peoples, and banana firms by Marcelo Bucheli, Darío Euraque, Steve Striffler, and John Soluri.

[3] See the works of Aviva Chomsky and Lara Putnam.



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