

Book Review

— *Cosechar para el mundo, pastar para la región. Una historia de globalización en los Montes de María (1850-1917)*, by Santiago Colmenares Guerra, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2023

The analysis of tobacco cultivation is a small but vibrant niche in Latin American social and economic history. Tobacco agriculture done by (semi-)independent peasant families has often been presented as an alternative to large-scale export agriculture undergirding more egalitarian and democratic social relations. These types of analysis mostly referred to the small-scale cultivation of so-called black tobacco which was primarily meant for cigar production. The cultivation of this type of tobacco took place in almost all tropical areas of Latin America but was especially noteworthy in Cuba, North-Eastern Brazil, and the Cibao valley in the northern part of the Dominican Republic. These regions have been the subject of extensive historical research and publications. The tobacco sector in Montes de María (producing the famous Carmen-tobacco) on the Caribbean coast of Colombia was just as important but was still waiting for serious historical research.

The first attempt to fill this gap was the publication by local historian Wilson Blanco in 2009, who on the basis of historical documents and oral history presented a historical geography of the region in 2009. The region now got its deserved second monograph by Santiago Colmenares Guerra who defended his doctoral thesis in 2017 and now published it with the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Colmenares is especially interested in the consequences of this global connection for the regional relations of production. To place these consequences into perspective he starts his book with a long chapter in which he compares the Carmen tobacco sector with other Latin American and Caribbean tobacco regions. The comparative angle provides an interesting and original perspective to his analysis and deepens our understanding of regional history.

Where Wilson Blanco organized his monograph around Colombia's physical geography, Santiago Colmenares is especially interested in the global insertion of the Colombian tobacco sector. His book interestingly dedicates much attention to the role of the German commercial firms which bought most of the regional tobacco. Their credit played a crucial in the regional economy, far transcending only the tobacco sector. He demonstrates how the region pulsated on

the rhythm of German credit. The influence of world market prices sometimes provided the region with booming economic vitality, whereas in other moments it led to deep crises.

Colmenares' book is the result of extensive research of local archives, in which especially the notarial records provided original local information. They allowed Colmenares to dig deep into the local organization of tobacco production and to analyse the distribution of its revenues. The local and regional details that are presented in the second half of his book are particularly rich. Colmenares meticulously describes the regional ups and downs which are caused by the cycles of the global tobacco market. Until 1870 tobacco prices were high providing the region with a financial and commercial boost and a *época dorada*. When global prices went down after the 1870s the region suffered accordingly leading to a gradual replacement of tobacco agriculture by cattle-holding. This also led to an increasing inequality in landholding patterns. Just as in other Latin American tobacco sectors, tobacco had traditionally supported small-scale peasant agriculture in the region where commercial tobacco cultivation existed side by side with the production of food crops. The shift to cattle-holding implied a gradual concentration of land in the hands of a few large land-holders closing the open land frontier that had benefitted peasant agriculture and increased the importance of wage labour. As Colmenares observes, the balance shifted from the *posesión* which allowed the peasantry to obtain land just by cultivating it, to *propiedad* where land possession was inscribed in notarial acts. In this process peasant agriculture increasingly lost its access to land and consequently its autonomy.

Colmenares has written a very interesting book, in which he presents a skilful analysis of the regional tobacco economy and its complex and sometimes contradictory links with the global market. His analysis of the flows of credit from German commercial houses to destitute peasant families with weak links to the monetary economy demonstrates the ambiguities of the export agriculture in this period where different relations of production coincided. A weakness of the book is that it still clearly reflects the doctoral thesis which was its origin. The theoretical introduction of the book is too long and takes attention away from the rich second part where the regional economy comes to life. A good overview of the region's history only comes in chapter 3, on page 180! In this sense, the book would have been helped by some more editing. The very interesting comparative angle could also have been elaborated a bit more in the conclusions of his book. In what sense has the specific political and geographical insertion of Montes de María determined its specific history and what remained of the autonomy of the tobacco peasantry in the twentieth century?

I would recommend reading this new book by Santiago Colmenares in combination with Wilson Blanco's somewhat older, but unjustly ignored book. The latter may be a bit less sophisticated but presents interested readers with a necessary historical and geographical introduction. For anyone interested in the Colombian tobacco sector and the field of Latin American tobacco history, they will remain the necessary books to consult for years to come.

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References

Blanco Romero, W. (2009). *Historia de El Carmen de Bolívar y su tabaco en los Montes de María. Siglos XVIII-XX*. Cartagena de Indias: Universidad de Cartagena.