

Chapter 2

If Leaders Like Alexander Von Humboldt, Ronald Reagan, and Xi Jinping Would Have Been Environmental Justice Radicals Using Public Internet and Drones: A Short Political Ecology of Central America with Regard to Global Agenda Setting in 2014

Falk Huettmann

One can no longer admire and appreciate these plants without recognizing the biological catastrophe that threatens them and us. (in Berry and Kress, Heliconia, an Identification Guide, 1991)

It would take six billion dollars of additional yearly investment to ensure basic education in all developing countries; eight billion dollars a year are spent on cosmetics in the United States. It would take nine billion to ensure clean water and sanitation for all; 11 billion are spent on ice cream in Europe. (Petrella, The Future of Liberation Theology: an Argument and Manifesto, 2006)

2.1 Introduction

Ever since the colonialists sailed up the San Juan River, located between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, trying to battle the indigenous people and chasing down some *pirates of the Caribbean*, it became clear to everybody that Central America has

Central America is defined here loosely, reaching from the southern USA, through the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean over to northern Venezuela and Columbia; it also includes the subsequent Pacific coast and its various islands. Often, the literature includes this region in the wider term “Latin America.” (Hanke and Rausch, People and Issues in Latin American History: From Independence to the Present; Sources and Interpretations, 1997)

F. Huettmann (✉)

EWHALE lab- University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), Fairbanks, AK 99775, USA
e-mail: fhuettmann@alaska.edu

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2015
F. Huettmann (ed.), *Central American Biodiversity*,
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4939-2208-6_2

precious resources and much real estate to offer the global community. But getting access to those resources came with great and long-lasting international conflicts (Brockett 1998; Diamond 1999; Blum 2000; Keen and Haynes 2004). First of all, it meant bone-breaking and chaotic wilderness explorations. But perhaps even more challenging than these were highly needed management strategies to address mass human suffering and killing (which left a bad legacy for centuries, almost globally, Chapman 2009). Massive boom-and-bust cycles have occurred in recent centuries in Central America. Who still remembers the huge vertigo trade, Greytown off Costa Rica's east coast (Lefever 1992), or the early US history in Central America (LaFeber 1993)? Linked with slavery and sugar and rum trade, these trade activities made for an early fast-lived center of globalization. It also provided for the required resources, and for a massive “political and ideological spice.” But why is it all now so broken (Hertsgaard 1999; see Mace et al. 2010 for a biodiversity assessment)?

From early on, the above operations were under attack. Consequently, many forts were strategically built on the east shore of Central America to protect such a global trade system; a military rule was in charge. These forts were key defense sites for Spain in the Caribbean, and they left a large environmental footprint (Jackson 1997). Famous archeological sites like El Castillo in Nicaragua (Fig. 2.1), Forte de la Trinidad, Fortaleza de San Fernando de Omoa in Honduras,



Fig. 2.1 El Castillo at the San Juan River in Nicaragua. This is a historic site and very important in the history of Central America, and for Spain, the UK, and the Caribbean region as well as globally

or Castillo del Golfo Dulce in Belize were part of these massive defense systems to support the colonial trade globally. Nations other than Spain followed suit with similar attempts, and the control and takeover history of these sites and trading routes have been written about in many books (e.g., Galeano 1997), whereas the western side of Central America along the Pacific was developed much later (Iglér 2013; Cushman 2013 for the *Compania Administradora del Guano* (CAG) and its story). Consequently, Central American nations present us with an east-to-west development gradient. And so, similar events as witnessed in the east coast repeated themselves on the west coast all over again, but with a century-long delay (Glavin 2003).

2.2 Central America and the Governance of One of the Wealthiest Economies in the World

Central America, albeit its society is quite impoverished these days (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012), still remains one of the liveliest and wealthiest places on the planet. It offers us many natural resources, as well as a large number of international celebrity items of world fame. Ultimately though, it were people who made Central America what it is today. But most importantly, outside powers started to dominate local societies and policies here. And many strong individuals personalized entire regional policies and setting an intrusive agenda that still destroys to this very day Central America's huge and multidimensional potential which is of large relevance for humankind (just consider that it contributes to the wealth and global dominance of colonial powers in Europe, for the USA, and now Asia). Brutal socioeconomic science-based powers keep it further in place (e.g., Walter 1993; Schlesinger et al. 2005; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Just start here for instance with Alexander von Humboldt, who is generally supposed to present an "objective" exploration and enlightened Western science. He did it with a Prussian discipline imposed onto wider Latin America and its people. But when looked at in earnest, these efforts have been very exploitive, abusive, and destructive. Many investigators of this Humboldtian style can be named from the tropics and for the study area, e.g., from James Cooke over Thomas Belt (2000) to numerous others (see Goodman 1992 for overview). Iglér (2013) mentions for such developments that their path through the Pacific is marked with blood.

Seen from a modern-day global perspective and global impacts onto Central America, let us perhaps first begin with the Nobel Prize winner in economy, Joseph Stiglitz (2006) and his global analysis. He has shown how much the Western industry is subsidized by the global community, e.g., by not signing the Kyoto agreement, and how it skews global competition allowing to pollute for a cheap industrial production that increases profits in the West (also referred to as the wealthy "North," Steger 2013). Stiglitz showed us on a global level how much this puts the undeveloped world into a disadvantage creating suffering people. Many other Nobel Prize

winners and economists described similar features when the current global machinery is allowed to apply its devastating procedures (Daly and Farley 2003). For more documentation on this topic, see Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2010). Ostrom is the first female economist to win a Nobel Prize in that discipline (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elinor_Ostrom). Considering this happened as late as 2009, it casts doubts on how “objective, non-biased and progressive most of our economists are”; those still act on a global scale advising the global decision makers. Ostrom bravely stated for her discipline what most anthropologists already knew for decades: the so-called tragedy of the commons (Hardin 1968) is basically just a man-made artifact allowing to abuse a system until it is broken. But this can only happen when an overall poor and careless leadership (“the framework” Ostrom 1990, 2010) allows it to happen (just think here of the classic example in Britain where the ruling royal family allowed for “the commons” to be exploited). In her work, Ostrom simply exposed these “tragedies of the commons” for what they really are: man-made artifacts and myths that insult many indigenous populations. That is because these people have managed the earth for millennia in a more or less sustainable fashion without relevant impacts (Miller 2012). Most indigenous populations I know of and which I have had the pleasure to meet and to experience would not leave the commons harmed in the way the Western society did and subsidized (Jackson 1997). This certainly applies to Central America as well. To stop such bad usage is what indigenous taboos and human society structures can be there for. Their systems worked for thousands of years without creating atmospheric destruction or nuclear waste, for instance (Diamond 1999). In these ancient “primitive” societies, many happy people were found (e.g., Ingstad 1954 stated from his work with indigenous people “Never in my life have I seen healthier kids. They are happier than most whites” *Spokane Daily Chronicle* June 7, 1950, p. 6). Some anthropologists argue though that humankind and human desire have not changed much across times and that therefore modern humankind hardly differs in its pursuit from what ancient societies did. But then, what is education, modernity, and conscience for? Is it for putting us onto a better path? And why could industrialization create so much misery worldwide? As can be seen in Central America, so far we failed making good use of these resources and of human wisdom (Perkins 2004; Siemer 2005; Mace et al. 2010).

Once the reader becomes more aware and fluent with system analysis, political ecology, environmental justice, and the numerous valid critiques and assessments of our industrial society and the Western society thinking and governance (Young 2002; Young and Steffen 2012; Alexander 2013; Cockburn 2013), the situation will become rather clear for Central America (and beyond). Virtually all ecological textbooks agree on the best ways how to live in the environment and what not to do (instead of ignoring taboos and thus wrecking the planet, etc.; Miller 2007). But ultimately, most global agendas have now been set by influential leaders of this world almost to wreck the planet through our globally active institutions and their instruments such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Bank, the International Money Fund (IMF), the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the International Council for Science (ICSU), the General Agreement

on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), etc. It actually started with a world order and governance scheme set in Bretton Woods, 1944 (Panitich and Gindin 2013; Steger 2013). Brockett (1998), Rich (1994), Galeano (1997), and Perkins (2004) documented these profiles and developments in a very impressive fashion. Where is democracy and sustainability in such situations and places, and how is the socioeconomic gap between the rich and poor reduced? Central America pays the bills either way while the money is made by allowing for tax breaks (the Horizon oil spill by BP in the Gulf of Mexico shows that pattern nicely; many other such examples can be shown, e.g. Gray 2012).

But locally, sophisticated expertise, culture, and knowledge are not missing at all in Central America. This region is, for instance, home to many Nobel Prize winners such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez in literature 1982 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Garcia_Marquez; Martin 2008). In his prize acceptance speech, he is quoted as saying, “I have the impression that in giving me the prize, they have taken into account the literature of the subcontinent and have awarded me as a way of awarding all of this literature.” And so, of course, many other highly recognized Central American writers and thinkers exist such as Ruben Dario from Nicaragua, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott (1990), and nowadays modern online bloggers (e.g., Yoani Sanchez from Cuba; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoani_Sanchez). Many more thinkers can be named, e.g., politicians awarded Nobel Peace Prizes (see sections below). A large Latino folktale art also exists (see, for instance, Lulu Delacre and Cuentos Populares Art by many Latino Artists). All of these paint us a very detailed, sophisticated, and very well-informed and multifaceted picture of the society, governance, and political situation for Central America (see Rochfort 1993 for murals, wall paintings, with a high political content and message).

In addition, some Central American nations were widely hailed for their skilled and wise political leadership in their respective nations (e.g., Don Pepe and Oscar Arias in Costa Rica) and for the region overall (Costa Rica gets often called upon to facilitate international conflicts). Further, many other high-ranking experts are found all over the world with a lifelong expertise in Central America as a topic. These are found in think tanks, with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and with the World Bank located for instance in the USA, in the European Union (EU), and with the UN. The role of advisors for Central America but who are located in Asia should also not be forgotten because Asian nations have for decades shaped many fates in Central America (Gallagher and Porzecanski 2010; Hardy 2014). For instance, China just built a copy of the Beijing Olympic Bird Nest Stadium in San Jose, Costa Rica, as a token of support for the local community. And for many years, Japan has been offering much technical assistance to Central America, such as for port building (Fig. 2.2), road and bridge constructions, medical aid, schooling, and general development funding (note that Japan itself still being on the edge of bankruptcy for years).

But eventually, any of this highly sophisticated expertise seems not really to trickle down to the Central American continent as a whole in a good and sustainable way and for its well-being, peace, and poverty eradication, yet. Poverty remains very large and the gap between the rich and the poor did not go away at all;



Fig. 2.2 A Japanese supported port facility in Nicaragua, Pacific Coast

it became worse. Modernization, Americanism, and its theories failed in Central America (Petrella 2006), as it failed in most other places (de Soto 2000; Easterly 2006; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Alexander 2013; Cockburn 2013). Although Central America obviously does not lack grandeur by any means, something is still missing there for human well-being, and it is an environmental problem as well. In the meantime, a human drama keeps on unfolding.

2.3 Central America and Some of Its Wicked and Complex Problems

In the following section, let me provide some examples to show the complex but often rather abysmal political Central American situation in more detail. For sources see for instance Galeano (1997), Blum (2000), Churchill (2003), Perkins (2004), Chapman (2009), Everard (2011).

Guatemala still suffers from a civil war, and the roots of which go back at least to the *coup d'état* from 1954 (the US Operation PBSUCCESS makes for a classic Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operation that in 1954 overthrew the democratically elected government by Jacobo Arbenz). Booby traps and landmines still remain in some Guatemalan landscapes, and large disputes exist around geological mine sites (e.g., operated by Canada) and in direct conflict with the indigenous populations.

Another nation, Honduras, also suffered from similar problems, including landmines, hurricanes, *coup d'états*, and constitutional crises. And then, the Dominican

Republic is the poverty house of the Caribbean for years. Adjacent Haiti fares hardly better after the earthquake and when considering its violent past (Katz 2014). As one of the wealthy slavery and sugar centers of early globalization some hundred years ago, it quickly sunk into a human chaos never resolving one of the core questions of human welfare (Pope Atkins 1999): How to distribute wealth equally and without conflict on a finite landmass? One might easily argue that a resolution to this question was not wanted by many leaders, and so outside powers kept it from the agenda by all means possible.

Next in line of a large string of poor Central American nations is Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan case hardly needs further mentioning here as the civil war brought this nation and its people regularly to the international headlines for over a decade. As can be seen in the consistently low tourism numbers for Nicaragua and relatively poor buy-in for trading with Nicaragua (Mayorga 2010), resentments by the global public sit deep. In the year 1972, when the USA strongly supported the National Guard of the dictator Somoza, the nation of Nicaragua was brought into large turmoil with huge human suffering. The infamous Iran–Contra affair of the subsequent Reagan administration (where the Nicaraguan contras were funded by the USA through selling arms to Iran) to fight off the otherwise successful Nicaraguan Sandinistas created another global insult. Consequently, that support policy was changed by the US government and had again large negative impacts on the local people either way (Panné et al. 1999). Nobody wins there. Nowadays, Nicaragua is generally peaceful, except for some recent conflicts with Columbia about maritime borders. Nicaragua remains war torn, and it carries a bad press and an undeserved poorly managed reputation. In its status, it can be compared to nations like Sierra Leone in Africa (Che Guevara realized early on intertropical connections among people, nations, and continents and consequently was active in Angola and Mozambique; Anderson 2010; Guevara 2013). Although Nicaragua now follows Costa Rica as a role model, and some of the Nicaraguan performance metrics are on the rise, many of its human welfare statistics are still among the lowest on earth (Mayorga 2010).

A similar situation can be stated with another Central American nation, Cuba, which presents us with another global dilemma where communism is now on the edge of crumbling. The country is bound to be swallowed again by other outside powers and governance systems also with very poor track records themselves (Cockburn 2013); a reason why the Cuban revolution actually started. The Cuban picture is not so black and white though: While the communist government in Cuba basically censors the Internet and some sort of public speech, Cubans are also still widely excluded from participating in a global community nor are they allowed to earn a salary in the USA (as imposed by the USA itself). Regardless of the governments and ideologies, citizens are caught in a legacy and pay the price again. The U.S. imposed international embargo against Cuba hardly makes sense anymore, cannot be in favor of basic human rights to the citizens, and even constraints the freedom of American citizens to travel and to spend money!

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, Panama favors much the Western model and has cemented its place in history with General Noriega, all centered around the inherent US fear for not losing control over the Panama canal (Dinges 1990). Perkins (2004) has described many aspects of this policy firsthand, and he



Fig. 2.3 Mexico City, an urban region with the size of a medium-sized European nation

implies that former General Omar Torrijos of Panama as well as the Ecuadorian President Jaime R. Aguilera were assassinated by US agents (a policy that was also believed to occur in other tropical nations like in Congo with Patrice Lumumba, a democratically elected independence leader).

And let us not forget Mexico, which is quite the economic urban giant in Central America (Fig. 2.3) and with much development (Fig. 2.4). It has basically run for decades an unresolved civil war, which nowadays spills back into the USA, e.g., as witnessed by the kidnapping of foreign citizens (in response see the “Turning the Tide” campaigns on racial profiling along Mexican border states in the USA). Many weapons can still enter Mexico freely from the USA (where most guns are still essentially legal, including many high-powered automatic ones). After a recent shooting incident, the Mexican government had to replace all police officers from its capital airport so that the police force remained unbiased and “clean” (details can be found in the local and international press, e.g., <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-mexico-kidnappers-20131009,0,1617714.story#axzz2ovbUahHp>). This can only present a public expression of distrust and incompetence of the governmental police force considering that virtually all (!) of the 348 serving police officers were immediately replaced, now serving elsewhere in the nation (with the explicit assumption that these officers now again can be fully trusted simply by transferring them to a new post). These efforts are part of an initiative by President Felipe Calderon who wages a 6-year offensive against drug cartels (but such efforts are not new at all nor are they achieving well). Newspaper articles actually cite more than 40,000 (!) drug-related killings, including c. 3000 dead police officers, since 2006. It is not only the airports but also the seaports that suffer from illegal actions.



Fig. 2.4 A photo from the Mexico City airport and with WWF re. TelCel supporting Jaguars. (Instead, such a mobile phone infrastructure tends to destroy the hilltops and habitats, so that Jaguars and their prey cannot live well in Mexico, hardly anywhere else.)

For instance, the Port of Lazaro Cardenas, second biggest in Mexico and acting as a hub for Asia, has seen many drug raids. It is a vital economic hub but widely in the hands of drug lords, such as the gang Knights Templar (The Economist 2013a). Remember that Mexico grows its economy by c. 4% per year, often based on oil products. But for what? To make the foreign company owners (e.g., located in the USA opposite of the Mexican border) richer (Authers 2013) while still not resolving the huge poverty and conflicts, or not addressing the police problem? Consider that Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX.com) is one of the top oil companies in Central America (others are found in Venezuela; also see refinery facilities by Shell (Holland) and Standard Oil (New Jersey, USA) on Aruba and Curacao islands such as the “Eagle” and “Lago” plants). Mexico was actually endowed with what was estimated in the 1970s as one of the world’s biggest oil resources (Authers 2013; Yergin 1991 for background). But currently, Mexico is coming out of a huge fiscal slump, with a financial crisis in the 1980s and 1990s showing that it could not live from oil alone and has to diversify its national portfolio. Mexico is a very proud nation, and it tries to be very modern like any other nation in the world: According to Latam Premium Investment Research (www.latamconfidential.com), 23.9% of Mexicans shop at Walmart frequently. Mexico is moving into a fully urbanized lifestyle which disrespects the needs of nature and sustainability.

However, the history of class struggle in Mexico fills many books (e.g., Brockett 1998; see also Galeano 1997), and it even involved a Russian intervention, Stalin-style (the Russian revolutionary Leo Trotsky was granted asylum there in 1936 and was later assassinated in Mexico by the orders of Stalin). It all made for a global legacy.

But the USA also has a very long history of engaging in a series of military campaigns in Mexico (apart from the fact that the USA–Mexican border location was not really clearly marked due to the various Spanish land claims and treaties).

In 1914, José Azueta evolved as a Mexican national hero in a battle against a US invasion in Mexico.¹ It is also worthwhile to state in this context that the subsequent USA–Mexican peace negotiations were started at Niagara Falls in Canada. This adds complexity because it brings the boreal nation of Canada into the tropical resource game early on. While Canada still claims strict neutrality in the UN, it actually raises with such a peacekeeping policy in power and thus benefits from “just helping out.” This global strategy of Canada will come up later again with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) treaties where Canada claims to be a better friend to the USA, whereas economically it is much smaller and less diverse than Mexico and thus has smaller markets and less industry. Seen from the US perspective, Mexico is a more promising partner in that regard, especially when it comes to the cheap labor force that keeps many labor-intensive industries in the USA, and USA as a nation, going! However, it is quite clear that the USA conveniently takes advantage of both nations. Canada offers raw resources and an Arctic ocean!

One way or another, Mexico represents us clearly with a multidimensional political mess. Once one gets involved more, it is very hard to resolve things orderly there. By now, the sociopolitical-economic situations in the tropics, and in Central America, are just too complex for easy solutions by “the West”; they are hard to understand for a good resolution and are certainly not fixed by throwing more money at it (this seems to make things worse because it tends to just empower the existing abusive structures, e.g., Easterly 2006).

Many other bad examples of direct inference, negative impacts, and Western colonial legacies can be named for Central America. For instance, three highly oppressive dictators—the Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo, the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza, and the Haitian dictator François Duvalier evolved due to the mishandlings of the respective American occupations in these countries (in the international policy literature they are established as the *Frankenstein dictators*). It is difficult to deny that the American political culture of the Big Stick ideology (*speak softly, and carry a big stick*) is just another form of neo-imperialism; colonial power was reestablished in the new millennium. Many scholars of neoliberalism say so clearly (Churchill 2003; Steger 2013; Cockburn 2013).

But despite all the huge political and human troubles, Central America still has a functioning society. This society though is quite hierarchical, religious, conservative, and follows distinct rules and adjusts to any changes (albeit politically known to be “apatic,” Petrella 2006). It is not surprising that an upper class exists and that it is in power (often with the help from outside). And these upper-class groups are clearly using their position for their own advantage (Fig. 2.5). They have been often described as filthy; and obesity is on the rise in Central America too (arguably a disease that is fueled by modern Western food habits as fancied by an upper class that can afford it).

¹ A statement from an American student of mine—and an attitude which can get frequently encountered—comes to mind here: When we were in the Ometepe field school of Nicaragua 1998 while the US embassy was bombed in Nairobi, she naively stated “What do all these people have against us, we are not bad people?”

Central American Biodiversity
Conservation, Ecology, and a Sustainable Future
Huettmann, F. (Ed.)
2015, XXVIII, 805 p. 259 illus., 80 illus. in color.,
Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4939-2207-9