

Literature and Human Rights in Central America.

Exploring an Ethical Vision using Honduras as a case study.

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The first-born were invoked by musicians, by singers... in the past, the painters and invoked them. But they turned into animals, turned into monkeys because they became arrogant, because they mistreated their younger brothers. It was in this way that their hearts were ameliorated; in this way that Maestro Mono and Maestro Simio were lost and annihilated, transformed into beasts. Popul Vuh.

### **1. Formative stage**

#### *Anti-colonist sentiments*

The biography of Central America begins with an abduction. In July of 1502, Christopher Columbus, on his fourth voyage to these coasts, traps a “putún,” or indigenous merchant, while they were both sailing in the Gulf of Honduras. He chronicles the event as follows:

Being the Mr. Advanced [Christopher] on that island [Guanaja], and wishing to know its secrets, his good luck ensured that a canoe as long as a galley and eight feet wide, made out of one solid piece of wood arrived...loaded with merchandise from the occidental world, including New Spain. There was an awning made of palm leaves in the middle, no different than those on Venetian gondolas, which protected all that was underneath it in such a way that neither rain nor waves could wet and ruin it. Underneath the awning were the children, women, and all of the baggage and merchandise<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This kind of procedure was not unusual. In *A people's history*, Zinn says: “This was to have enormous consequences: it led Columbus to take some of them aboard ship as prisoners because he insisted that they guide him to the source of the gold”. And: “he took more Indian prisoners and put them aboard his two remaining ships”. p. 3.

Hernando Colón explain that the 25 men who rowed the canoe surrendered to “men that pursued them” and that overtaken by our men without a fight, it was taken before Colón, who ordered that all of the valuable items be removed from the canoe, like cotton shirts and blanket, in exchange for “some things,” that were likely trinkets and mirrors. He hired an old man named Yumbé to show them geographical layout, of this exotic world: specifically, the dangers, and routes where water was accessible. When they arrived to a place where Yumbé could no longer be of service to them because the indigenous peoples spoke a different language than his, the Almirante, gave him “some things” and sent him back to his land “very happy.” Hernando does not indicate where or how he liberates this primitive central American, but it is likely that he abandoned him at any one of a number of different sites along the coast.

It was through this series of events that the bestial colonization came to be and that the truths and exaggerations with regards to the enslavement of the indigenous population, and the massacres led by the chief colonizers, even amongst themselves, came to fruition, further verifying the so named “black legend” of the Spanish monarchy, which was scandalized and complicated by the followers and dissenters of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas.

In this context the first heroes of the imaginary civic Central American are born, chiefs of native tribes that were remembered 500 years later as the original nationalists in their resistance to the first wave of Castilian invasion, in 1525.

We can refer here to historical figures such as chieftain Paris de Castilla del Oro (Panamá), to the 18 Tapaligüil de León (Nicaragua) warriors, all of those attacked by Pedrarias Dávila; to chief Çicumba (Çoçumba, Socremba, Joamba ) from Ticamaya, who fought twelve years for his territory, and to Elempira, both from Honduras, who agglutinated thirty thousand warriors; and to Tecún Umán from Guatemala, to the mythical Atlacatl from El Salvador and to Garabito from Costa Rica, among many others recognized or forgotten over time<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Pastor Fasquelle. *Biografía de San Pedro Sula: 1536-1954*. San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Centro Editorial, 1989.

And here we must pause to obtain our first conclusion. When these indigenous chieftains assumed power as forces of resistance to being absorbed into European dominion, the human rights doctrine did not yet exist; it didn't come about until centuries later, during the Enlightenment, when philosophers finally conceived of the idea that man – and not religion or monarchs – was responsible for the movement of history.

Although not formally theorized – in other words, not submitted to a process of critical reflection – the idea that unified all of these primitive warriors was the defense of their territory, meaning the defense of all of the people that lay within it. The Spanish military invasion fell upon them as a threat to their rights: their right to coexistence and peace, their right to their land as a place rich with past tradition and future promise for their people, their right to their land as a source of nutrition, belonging and imagination, their right to dignity as human beings with a past story and future dreams to be fulfilled...

When on the 26th of August of 1789, the Constitutional Assembly of France emits the first known declaration of human rights, it affirms:

“the ignorance, negligence, or disdain for human rights are the only causes of public calamity and corruption in governments” (Preamble. Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen)

And three centuries later, in 1948, the United Nations proclaims:

“No one will be submitted to slavery or servitude and slavery in all of its forms will be prohibited” (Article 4. United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

It can thus be asseverated, that an important component of the philosophy of human rights is born in America as a place where the continual practice of violence exerted by central-European kingdoms – English, Portuguese, Welsh and Dutch, in addition to Spanish – is showcased<sup>3</sup>. Pinto Soria affirms this:

The traumas and social fractures in the indigenous society brought on by the Conquest, were irreversible; numerically in some place it was finally decimated –

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<sup>3</sup> Ver la terrible novela de Mario Vargas Llosa, *El sueño del Celta*, y su complemento historicista: Williams et al. *La tragedia del Congo*.

Honduras and Costa Rica – and in other place, like in Guatemala, it could not recover during the three centuries of colonial domination<sup>4</sup>.

Over the course of the 300 years of colonial abuses, the weight of the revolutionary theses of Montesquieu, Decartes, Rousseau, and Diderot, among others, conclude that softening the ruthless imperial enterprise, and in the first decade of the 19th century, the dictatorial climate of the Spanish monarchy softens as new propositions for government and democratization emerge.

At this juncture, two pivotal figures of Central America surface, both proponents of autonomy and each with his own share of opposition.

While Guatemalan hero, Pedro Molina, and his wife Bedoya, demand absolute and immediate independence from Spain, the representative of philosophical rationalism, José Cecillo del Valle, believes that before entrusting the people with liberty, they must be educated so that they may govern it justly.

Valle and Molina differed in process rather than result: Valle wanted the changes to take place gradually, while Molina demanded immediate change<sup>5</sup>.

Valle (Honduras 1772 – Guatemala 1834) is an exceptional figure not only in terms of his capacities as a thinker, writer, philosopher, scientist, naturalist, economist, and politician, but also, as an educator. He is the first to proclaim the importance of a new science called Statistics in 1830 Central America, for its capacity to procure for societies a wealth of information, which would be useful for governments to rule properly.

Immersed in an abysmally uneducated society, with illiteracy rates around 99%, and with an official bureaucracy which only aspired to please its boss – whether that be an immediate governor or the king in a far peninsula – de Valle constructs an identity of science as a dream of liberty.

Until this point (1820), the kingdom of Guatemala was made up of five provinces: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, y Costa Rica, the first of these, containing the colonial authorities, being the developed capital, and the others the underdeveloped periphery.

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<sup>4</sup> Pinto Soria, Ed. “El régimen colonial (1524-1750)”. *Historia General de Centroamérica*, tomo II, España, Siruela, 1993. p. 12

<sup>5</sup> Arias. *Configurando los estudios culturales centroamericanos*.

Without knowing the human rights doctrine, which did not exist as such, Valle proclaims the every political decision should ensure that its results will impact the economy such that the common man will benefit. The independence of 1821, says, it wasn't the sole goal of the Central Americans when they proclaimed, then

In what ways will we have advanced if we replace the Spanish, English, or Portuguese regimes with a despotic government? America proclaimed its independence for two reasons: 1) that the government in power be within the same borders as they people they are ruling and 2) that it governs the people in a way that is just and that protects the individual rights of men<sup>6</sup>

In speaking of “individual rights,” Valle – the only Central American admitted to the French Academy – proposes from this remote center of America the same principals of the great Enlightenment thinkers, particularly in the notion that the State must be able to guarantee peaceful and stable preservation of the citizens’ rights to political freedom and property, among other things. And for this, Valle insists, that public education should be restored, and empowered to teach individuals their rights and to fight for them in good conscience.

The towns that want to be free must learn to be so; and these lessons may only be taught in a revitalized public education system<sup>7</sup>.

He goes farther even, and recommends that each province establish schools of political science “to train the next generation of leaders.”

There have been schools to teach how to operate a cannon and how to wield a sword, but there has been no school founded to teach how to properly govern...<sup>8</sup>

It worries him that despotism should find a niche in America due to the illiteracy and superstition of the people, and because of the absence of education on the relationship between governors and governed. He is further interested because the government is constituted on an organic base of two complementary powers, legislative and executive, each forcibly limited in rules and regulation of a modern Political Constitution:

“modern” meaning, with the values of 1825 as their reference.

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<sup>6</sup> García Laguardia. “José del Valle. Ilustración y Liberalismo”. p. xxvii. Opuesto a esa visión es el libro de López Jiménez. *Valle. Fouché de Centro América...* Leer por equilibrio: Oqueli, Ramón, Ed. *Antología de José Cecilio del Valle, y, Leiva Vivas. Vigencia.*

<sup>7</sup> Del Valle. *Plan de la Constitución política de la nación Mexicana.* Cit., en García Laguardia, p. LIII.

<sup>8</sup> Idem.

Many of his academic and official speeches also insist that the death penalty, so frequently abused by the colonial regime, be eliminated, and that Rights and Political Economy exist in harmony, since this relationship would produce laws that would benefit the citizens.

In short, the life of Valle is dedicated to the cultivation of the sciences, not for the sake of the sciences themselves, but rather as a theoretical and practical set of ideals on which to base a defense of communal rights.

For these and other reasons Arturo Arias has motioned for Valle to be considered the “father of cultural studies” in America, since he preceded José Martí (1853-1895) – who until now has been honored with this title – in studying the ideas which are integral to these studies today<sup>9</sup>.

The conception of Latin American thinking is seen as originating in Cuban poet, José Martí's, essay, *Nuestra América* (1891), which was published in New York and later in Mexico City with Uruguayan essayist, José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900). However, it could easily be affirmed that Latin-American cultural studies, in fact began with Valle's work in the 1820's, rather than with Martí's essays later on... My objective is not so much to glorify Valle, but rather to argue that, without question, he must be situated as the forerunner of Central American, and undoubtedly, Latin-America cultural studies, for being the first person to articulate, from an epistemological continental perspective, conceptual discourses in interdisciplinary and cultural terms: a phenomenon which practically does not repeat itself until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>.

Valle forms part of the distinguished group of deputies and intellectuals who are convoked in order to install the first constitutional assembly in Central America<sup>11</sup>, which, among their tasks, were charged with defining a system of unification and government that would be implemented in the five provinces of their territory; begin the drafting of the laws of the new republic and, globally, draw a democratic profile for the region.

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<sup>9</sup> Arias. Op. Cit.

<sup>10</sup> Idem.

<sup>11</sup> Mariano Gálvez, Francisco Barrundia, José Simeón Cañas entre otros. Ver: Pinto Soria. “La independencia y la Federación” en *Historia General de Centroamérica*, pp-73-136.

When independence is produced, it carries with it a destruction of the colonial institutions of the past, resulting in a power vacuum. The dismantling of the old administrative structures and creation of new political organizations, also results in the abandonment of the old theory of the divine right of kings to rule – which served to legitimize the power of monarchies – and the adoption of new liberal republican ideas<sup>12</sup>. Imbued with an acutely humanist spirit, one of the first revolutions of the Assembly abolished slavery in Central America on April 24, 1824, a phenomenon which occurred nine years before it did in England, 39 years before Russia and the United States, and 65 before Brazil<sup>13</sup>.

With the same foresight, it declared freedom of religion on May 2, 1832, destroying the intense monopoly of the Catholic church over religious and secular matters and empowering society, who received the titles “individuals” and “citizens.”

### **Federalist Thought**

Simultaneously, there emerged, in Central America, the extraordinary historical figure, Francisco Morazán, Chief of State in Honduras (1827-1828), in El Salvador (1839-1840), in Costa Rica (April to September 1842) and President of the Federal Republic of Central America (1829-1838).

Morazán’s story fills thousands of pages in regional history books, more often for his military prowess destined to defend the federalist system, than for his civic proposals to Congress, or for his liberal thought, both domains in which he has distinguished himself as a pivotal thinker, specifically with regards to the rights of citizens.

The bibliography concerning this hero is lengthy, initiated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and expanded upon substantially in the centuries that followed, being that his legacy is still extensively influential in countries like Guatemala and Costa Rica. His own direct thoughts are scarcely documented (Memorias, Manifiesto de David, Testamento),

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<sup>12</sup> García Laguardia. *De Bayona a.*

<sup>13</sup> Idem

considering that his political and governing actions best illuminate his commitment to democracy<sup>14</sup>.

First and foremost, Morazán distinguishes himself through his intense respect for the constituent towns of Central America during his time, without exception. He barely directs a “savage” epithet to the town in the jungle region of La Mosquitia, who is an ally of the English monarchy and staunchly opposed to the Central American Federation, because he understands that their lack of both education and political sense are what cause their alienation. In January 1830 he stops an indigenous rebellion in what is currently known as the Department of Olancho, in Honduras, mediating a conversation between the two chieftains below a tree, without weapons or bodyguards, before chastising and reprimanding them. In January 1838 he triumphs over a subversion inspired by the Guatemalan mestizo leader, Raffael Carrera, in which Carrera was accompanied by thousands of natives, which Morazán tries to convince to surrender peacefully, rather than be subject to the power of his weaponry. He succeeds in drafting an agreement with the people that they soon ignore. During his eleven years of life in the political and military limelight, Morazán maintains his reputation for never having mistreated his prisoners of war, and rather being very considerate of their wellbeing. In fact, he commands such esteem from his enemies, that in one case, opponent, Aycinena, leaves him a note entrusting him with his own wounded soldiers<sup>15</sup>.

This historical evidence all points to a humanist and liberal ethic different from the traditional European governing tactics of making war, rather than constructing peace. Despite his own formation in which he lacked formal education, Morazán strengthened the web of intellectuals and unionists who were active in the area throughout his eight years as President of two governments, for the purpose of preserving the continuity and survival of the democratic nation. These liberal circles required constant vigor in order to remain in perpetual opposition to old and new conservative enemies, including people, vices, and residual thinking from the old colonial system.

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<sup>14</sup> Ortega. *Morazán, laurel sin ocaso*. Para endosos literarios sobre su vida, aunque históricamente correctos, ver mi libro: *El General Morazán marcha a batallar desde la muerte* (novela), 2012. Griffith amplía el conocimiento de los escritos del héroe en: *The personal archive of Francisco Morazán*.

<sup>15</sup> Ver Rosa. *Historia del Benemérito*. pp. 123-139.

For this he surrounds himself with, and articulates sympathizers of republican thought (the fiebres or anarchists), because it is these people who oppose themselves to the status quo and reclaim their transformation. The conservatives integrated with the clergy (servants or aristocrats) opposed them: the essentially Guatemalan aristocracy (experimented in administration and privileges of the Spanish government), farmers and an enormous illiterate population, superstitious about religion, remiss of political culture and jealous when confronted with the smallest proposition of change.

From the day that the Constitutional Assembly is established (June 24, 1823), seemingly later than the congress.

For that reason, it is important to pause here a minute to understand the repercussions about the theory and practice of human rights.

### ***a) Idea of a nation***

The first thing that must be established is that in such a moment, meaning in 1823, there is no existing concept of a structured nation in this region. The idea of “Central America” itself is factually exotic – “well, why and in what way will we liken the Salvadorians to the Guatemalans, the Hondurans and the Nicaraguans with the Costa Ricans?” - lacking theoretical substance and barely beginning to formulate itself.

The only thing that gives life to this young political body is, more than ever, an imaginary; this is an undefined collection of ideas and sentiments around which they must resolve the historical conflicts of the whole region, and the way in which their similarities must fall together so that a simple public manifestation would be considered political expression. García Laguardia remembers how the word “republic” is never mentioned in the Act of Independence of 1821<sup>16</sup>.

The ideologues of the time faced a grave and difficult task, almost taumaturgic: that of imagining and inventing a nation, and over the course of 19 months the Constitutional Assembly produces 784 acts, 137 decrees, and 1186 orders<sup>17</sup>. The new Constitution

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<sup>16</sup>García Laguardia. *De Bayona...*

<sup>17</sup> Ese corpus jurídico “se orientó a constituir el nuevo país: formuló las nuevas denominaciones al darle el nombre de Provincias Unidas del Centro de América; organizó un ejecutivo colegiado de tres miembros; declaró religión oficial la Católica; garantizó la inmunidad parlamentaria; se prometió a reconocer la deuda pública; declaró la igualdad ante la ley; confirmó a las autoridades existentes; creó la primera biblioteca pública ya que las existentes, algunas importantes, eran privadas y de acceso limitado; abolió tratamientos

adheres itself to a new representative republican government constituted by the three powers of the social pact and – which, here, is of greater interest – emits a declaration of the rights of man and citizen based on the accepted principals of equality, liberty, property, and security.

Logically, it relies on pre-existing models, of which the most visible, for its success, is the federal system in the United States<sup>18</sup>. There are many discussions on record concerning this topic in the bosom of Constitutional Assembly, which have generated much doubt.

The United States is born after a relatively brief period as a colony, unlike Central America whose colonial period lasted 300 years. This resulted in an economic model different from that of Spain, freer in its commerce and production relationships. Particularly, however – among other factors – the population that inhabited present day United States has, from its beginnings, superior quality of education in comparison with neighboring Central America<sup>19</sup>. In addition to the fact that their mental attitude has a proclivity for rebellion, for development and innovation, for exploration of worlds and oceans and mercantilism, in so far as Central America must count on a scarcity – and a truly extreme scarcity at that – of an intellectual critical mass, with a human demographic with a poor educational background and with vices inherited from a culture with despotic, discriminatory and settled protocols based on the power of exclusion, rather than inclusion. The legislators of the Assembly of 1824 recognize the complicated task with precision:

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[los de excelencia, señoría, don, otros similares]; derogó disposiciones discriminatorias para hijos ilegítimos; dictó regulaciones migratorias favorables a los extranjeros; creó los emblemas nacionales; abolió la esclavitud; reconoció el derecho de asilo; aplicó inquisición revolucionaria contra empleados adversos al nuevo régimen; excitó a las asambleas americanas para realizar un Congreso continental, antecedente del proyecto de Bolívar, idea precursora en la que Valle tiene papel protagónico, y con gran interés siguió los pasos del Congreso de Panamá y designó los representantes guatemaltecos”. *Idem*. Ver asimismo: Luján. *La recepción del constitucionalismo moderno*.

<sup>18</sup> “Al trazar nuestro plan, nosotros hemos adoptado en la mayor parte, el de los Estados Unidos, ejemplo digno de los pueblos nuevos independientes, mas hemos creído hacer alteraciones bien notables y crear, por decirlo así, todo lo que debe acomodarse a nuestras circunstancias o ajustarse a los más luminosos principios que desde la época de aquella nación han adelantado en mucha parte la ciencia legislativa. Tuvimos, sobre todo, presentes las Constituciones de España y Portugal, la federativa y la central de Colombia y toda la legislación constitucional de Francia ... nosotros hemos aprovechado alguna parte de las máximas establecidas en todas estas instituciones y combinándolo todo con nuestras ideas, nos propusimos una Constitución peculiarmente nuestra y singularmente ajustada a los principios”. *Informe de la Comisión*, cit., por García Laguardia en *De Bayona...*

<sup>19</sup> Passim. Zinn. *A people's history*.

To create a new political order over the ruins of despotism – they say – without the grand amalgamation of theoretical and local knowledge which modern institutions demand: apply this knowledge to heterogeneous, unrefined towns, which are worlds apart in every sense, from the place from which they came, without a statistical or topographical plan, without even a Census of the capital, without sufficient historical details about the customs and character of its inhabitants, or of their strength and capacity for liberty, was an arduous and tiring endeavor for the Commission, except that because they were motivated by the triumphant desire to give a vital purpose to their homeland<sup>20</sup>.

The ethical platform on which this Commission leans in order to configure the federal Central American Constitution comes from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen<sup>21</sup> decreed by the French constituents in August 1789, not only because it was the most civically advanced document of the times, but also because the majority of Central American legislators derive their thinking directly from the Enlightenment and Enciclopaedism – like Valle – as they were liberal republicans, enamored by France and the United States<sup>22</sup>.

They are political and theoretical documents that, in principle, are born of the same spirit as the declaration of individual rights formulated in Virginia (United States) in the early times and later in France<sup>23</sup>. However, our purpose is narrative, and we cannot discuss these aspects now. But it must be noted that the legislators of Central America, in the Constitution of 1824, as in the sessions of Federal Congress that followed, were inspired by the ethical philosophy of the human rights that was born in France, England, and the United States. There are scarce references to oriental thinking or thinking from India,

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<sup>20</sup> *Informe de la Comisión*, Op. Cit.

<sup>21</sup> Cuya primera traducción americana al castellano, producto de Antonio Nariño y publicada en Bogotá en 1793, debió ser perfectamente conocida y circulada entre los legisladores de Centro América.

<sup>22</sup> La *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (1789) fue prefacio a la Constitución de 1791. Una segunda versión ampliada conocida como Declaración de los Derechos del Hombre, de 1793, fue aprobada posteriormente en la Constitución francesa de ese año, ambas brevemente aplicadas, y seguida por la Declaración de Derechos y Deberes del Hombre y del Ciudadano, de 1795 (Constitución de 1795), decretada por el Directorio.

<sup>23</sup> El primer manifiesto de derechos del hombre en la época moderna es la [Declaración de Derechos de Virginia](#), de [George Mason](#) y proclamada por la Convención de [Virginia](#) en [Junio 12 1776](#). Influyó a [T. Jefferson](#) para la definición de derechos humanos contenida en la [Declaración de Independencia de EUA](#), de [Julio 04, 1776](#). Este, fundamentado en el iusnaturalismo racionalista, supone la conversión del derecho subjetivo en centro del orden jurídico. *Wikipedia*.

while Latin American thinking is still not defined as its own entity, a group which is not considered stand-alone until 1856, when the fight against William Walker, the filibuster<sup>24</sup>.

### **War against slavery**

It is precisely during this period in the 1850's when Central America liberates itself from its historical battle against the most horrible violation of human rights, which is slavery. William Walker, the lawyer, doctor and journalist from Memphis, arrives in Central America as a contracted mercenary for the Democrats of Nicaragua faction, to combat the Legitimist party, but due to a series of political developments, he ends up becoming the president of the country.

He declares several intentions, among which is featured his goal of reestablishing forced labor in Nicaragua and following that, through Central America, if he succeeded in expanding his power over other countries in the isthmus<sup>25</sup>.

Consequently, the other states organized a conglomerate army which advanced on Nicaragua and defeated Walker, who fled back to the United States via Panama, from which he returned in 1860 with new expeditionary and filibuster power.

This power was also defeated and Walker was gunned down in Trujillo, at the same place on the Atlantic where Christopher Columbus had celebrated his first continental mass four centuries earlier.

Long before Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888) coined his liberation cry of “civilization or barbarism” the Central American states were confronting a transcendental dilemma: whether to permit a new colonialism to impose itself on their lands or to combat it.

This young imperialism sheltered by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and incarnated in William Walker, among other dominating forces from the United States, assaulted the

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Estrade asevera que la expresión América Latina “se inventó en 1856 en son de reivindicación identitaria y de manifiesto político (...) el 22 de Junio de 1856, en París, delante de más de treinta ciudadanos de casi todas las repúblicas del Sur, en acto de repudio a la agresión a Nicaragua, el chileno Francisco Bilbao calificó de ‘latina’ a la América que defendía y promovía y evocó a ‘la raza latino-americana’, oponiéndola a Estados Unidos de América y al yanqui”. El 26 de Septiembre de 1856 y motivado por la misma agresión, el poema “Las dos Américas” del colombiano, exilado en París, José María Torres Caicedo, vuelve a emplear el término.

<sup>25</sup> *Passim*. Roche. *Historia de los filibusteros*; Morán. *Potencias en conflicto*.

delicate balance of the rights of citizens in the region. It is not that the local government were operating ideally with respect to the human condition, but rather that now, the matter left the internal political game to be converted into an attempt at domination by external forces.

In other words, Walker's action jeopardizes the existence of the Central American nations of the time, through its threat to the fragile structure of justice, equality, peace and cohabitation that the post-federal legal system which had been slowly building upon itself with each republic.

The Gaceta de Guatemala warned the Nicaraguans to be wary of Walker, since it was certain that with him:

They would lose their religion, social customs, and Spanish-American traditions.

They would be humiliated, scorned, and driven into a miserable corner of Nicaragua, prisoners of foreign exploiters<sup>26</sup>.

This was probably the greatest threat that Central American countries encountered in terms of their identity and the constant validation of the rights of citizens established in their constitutional documents.

## **II.-LA MODERNIDAD**

A morning wind, full of effluvia,

Advances on all of the foreheads of America

Juan Ramón Molina "Águilas y Cóndores".

Discussions exist concerning the time period in which the Central American region enters into modernity. For some, it is during the epic collaboration against Walker's forces, for others it is late in the twentieth century.

It is not important to define this process, but rather distinguish how, through the dissolution of the federal government in the late 1830s, and after the birth of the Central American National states in the 1840s, followed a long battle between liberals and conservatives, the former with the purpose of restoring the Federation, and the latter with the goal of maintaining the colonial status quo.

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<sup>26</sup> Rosengarten. *Freebooters must die!*, p. 211; passim, Roche. *Historia de los filibusteros*.

These young states, in entering into modernity, budding liberty of thought and literature, just as a new economic and commercial order was established, encourage the emergence of art which up until that point, only existed in the form of instruments used for religious ceremonies. Specifically, a Central American literature was born.

In the case of Honduras, it is interesting to know how the so called government of the Liberal Reform (1876-1890) socialized the cultural offerings through the creation of archives, national libraries, newspapers and gazettes, the formation of classical and contemporary bands and orchestras, the erection of commemorative statues and monuments, the call for writers and the publication of books, among other actions concerned with intellectual advancement<sup>27</sup>.

The application of the sociological method to some artistic productions that arose between 1900 and the present offers a rich deposit of manifestations related to human rights. Many of them are portraits of the vibration of their times, and in come form capture the social commotion from which they emerged permitting not only aesthetic, but also political, economic, and anthropologic readings of the texts.

One can read “Grapes of Wrath” by John Steinbeck, for example, with equal success from a perspective focused solely in its literary achievement, as one can from a perspective rooted in other disciplines. The same thing can be done with Whitman’s Leaves of Grass, or in an application of psychoanalytic theory to understand Hamlet. In the case of Central America, and in the specific case of Honduras, the laws emitted then facilitate a knowledge of the official advancements achieved with regards to human rights, but literature, is what permits the reader to comprehend the collective demand and social cry at a particular moment in history. Literature, then, acts as a barometer of the circumstances, particularly with regards to the historical demands.

Castañeda Batres warns how in the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century writer were, in addition to being poets,

Men of the public, linked inextricably to the politics and civil battles of their people<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Passim. Escoto. *Imágenes de Tegucigalpa*.

<sup>28</sup> Cit., por Umaña. *La palabra iluminada*, p. 46.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the intellectual become motivating agents for political change and their first claim is for respect towards democracy. Specifically, they framed their demand in terms of an understanding of the right to choose and be chosen, and just as importantly, the right to alternate power and reject dictatorship.

The register first of romantic production, and then modernist, effected by Helen Umaña's criticism, reveals how between poems of love and nature, authors produce artistic writing that demands the enforcement of the political right to live in a democracy.

In his sonnet, "The Heroic Muse," José Antonio Domínguez (1869-1903)<sup>29</sup> redacts a military manifesto-like work in which he asks poets to invest themselves in the social struggle and rather than conceive of metaphors, to create thoughts:

Shoot the arrow of gold in an idea;  
Lay down the worship of Eros and proclaim  
Another better; the struggle beseeches you:  
Stand up actively in the social struggle.

At the same time, and with the purpose of invigorating feelings of national identity, poets, narrators, and journalists publish works that exalt the action of trailblazers and founders, mainly with regards to civic figures such as Francisco Morazán, the honorable José Cecilio del Valle<sup>30</sup>, from whom they the virtues of honor, honesty, brotherhood, and patriotism. These model humans are posed to society as emblems of the greatest humanist values, and thus as emblems of the most just and moderate practices of individual and collective rights.

Poet, Juan Ramón Molina, (1875-1908) rises above this prevailing abstract discourse and when he is exiled in 1892, he complains, in concrete terms, about the real suffering in his society, which was dominated by dictator. One stanza of "Adios a Honduras" expresses that the people are like a condor that extends its wings for liberty, but that

In soaring to crown his longing  
A bold tyrant

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<sup>29</sup> Umaña considera que el texto "Himno a la materia" de Domínguez es probablemente "el primer gran poema de la lírica hondureña". Op. Cit., p. 86.

<sup>30</sup> Escritos sobre estas figuras y temas se encuentran, entre muchos otros, en José Antonio Domínguez, Rómulo E. Durón, Jeremías Cisneros, Esteban Guardiola, Juan Ramón Molina, Froylán Turcios.

Has severed them with bullets

The poem is prodigious in harsh adjectives, such as “mandatory stupid and abject,” “despotic,” “intestinal battles” and “infamy,” and reveals an early birth of poetry of protest, different from the previously romantic or modernist poetry, in which words were rarely intended to denounce, and rather, usually dedicated to playfulness.

His contemporary, Froylán Turcios, adopts a similar attitude against civil wars – which are concrete transgressions of the rights to coexistence and peace – and about whom José Antonio Funes asserts:

He was never far from the political battles of his country<sup>31</sup>

### **a) Angelina**

The first novel recognized as such in Honduras, the book “Angelina,” by Carlos F. Guitiérrez (1861-1888), is in itself a broad metaphor about the suffering of the people at the hands of a government who undermines human rights. The work relates the existence of a young village beauty named Angelina, who is captured, brought to a mountain cave, and raped by a burly man, who is mentally retarded.

Guitiérrez, who is a romantic, conceives of Angelina as the people: beautiful and innocent, which makes her unafraid to approach risks, without trepidation or malice, as she doesn’t believe that she will be hurt by them. But Julián’s world is made up of sensual intentions: possession and lust.

And from here that, as tyrants do, after fleeing from holds of democracy, captures Angelina and locks her away without the freedoms to thought, expression, movement or independence, much less to choose her intellectual or gender determination. Until the citizens of the slums – which represent the educated and civilized – band together to rescue the girl, but arrive too late. Facing assault, Angelina launches herself into an abyss and ties crazy Julián to a post, from which she hopes he will never escape.

Teacher, Arturo Alvarado, sees in Angelina, the eternal struggle between nature and culture<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Funes. *Froylán Turcios*. p. 200; Ver: Turcios. *Memorias*.

<sup>32</sup> Alvarado. *Por otra lectura de Angelina*. p. 33.

## b) La epoca sardinista

A case of even greater interest presents itself in the relationship between Honduran poet, Froylán Turcios (1874-1943) and Nicaraguan rebel leader, Augusto C Sandino, since, in this case the writer steps outside of fiction to defend the actual rights to sovereignty possessed by every society.

As is known, the north American Marine Infantry landed in Nicaragua to stabilize the country after internal warfare, but they remained there, against the will of the people, until 1933. Due to the fact that Nicaragua had previously (1855) been subject to filibusters, such as William Walker, this Marine intervention generated fear and distrust that it could turn into a general military occupation.

Sandino, who was then a junior leader, raises arms and over six years (1927-1933) orchestrates permanent guerilla warfare against the north American military presence until he succeeds in expelling them from his country.

At a certain point (September of 1927) Sandino and Turcios establish communication and from this point until 1929 Turcios becomes an international spokesperson for the Nicaraguan rebel movement<sup>33</sup>, contributing in such a way to reestablishing civil liberties, meaning the practices and democratic rights of citizens, in Nicaragua.

To this end, Turcios wrote letter to famous intellectuals and politicians of the world, before whom he praised the feats of Sandino, in addition to redacting articles, essays, and poems, and directing magazines where he reproduced the parts of the war in which Sandino was involved and exalted his deeds. A short time later, both would break off their relationship, Turcios alleging that Sandino had become another traditional Central American politician, and had stopped being the hero which he had once been.

## III. To the future

The region has scarcely produced theories on the topic of human rights, and has concentrated rather, in ratifying all of the international conventions concerning the issue. However, there have been a number of collateral expressions on the enforcement and violation of human rights, and creative literature (novel, short stories, poems) is plagued with both direct and metaphorical manifestations of this kind.

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<sup>33</sup> Passim. Wunderlich. *Sandino, una biografía política*; Sélser, *Sandino, general*. p. 189

A wide vein for this type of literature was born when the writers decided to transfer to their books, the histories of the workers of the banana companies. These companies arrived in Honduras at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the 60 years that followed, they became more potent until they finally had the capacity to change governments, impose ministers and deputies, initiate or impede revolutions, as well as exert enormous economic and political influence over society<sup>34</sup>.

But just as they generated many technological benefits and jobs, they also made some grave mistakes and abuses, which have been dramatized in various literary works. In *Opalinaria*, for example, Juan Alger fabricates the way in which – as is supposed occurred in actuality – the managers of the Cuyamel Fruit Company bribed the president of the republic. In her novel, *Barro*, author Paca Navas de Miralda reconstructs the sleight employed by the officials of Standard Fruit Company (formerly Vaccaro Bros. Co.) to gain power over rural and urban territories in La Ceiba, and the artifices through which they evade taxes, exceeds the concession authorized by the state and they submit the region to their economic control. In *Prisión Verde*, laureate author, Ramón Amaya Amador, meticulously details the series of violations committed by the United Fruit Company, impinging on the labor and civil rights of its employees.

Although composed from literary inspiration, these and other similar works of the period are pointed denunciations of the abuses, resulting from the existence of transnational power in Honduras, and in which he frequently counts on endorsement from or complicity with national authorities.

The abuses presented in this literature of denunciation, refers mainly to the exploitation of farm workers in the Atlantic region of Honduras: unjust or discriminatory salaries, racism, economic, political or police repression, manipulation of compensation through the allocation of tokens, rather than money, which could only be used at the company's stores, undervaluation of the woman, and others.

After the military repression of a movement of farmers, who demanded better living conditions and work, Navas de Miralda observes the following in her work *Barro*:

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<sup>34</sup> Existen muchos estudios sobre el *momentum* bananero, pero baste citar dos para profundizar en la materia: McCann. *Una empresa norteamericana*, y, Posas. “La plantación bananera en Centroamérica. 1870-1929”.

The way in which the strike had to end in an outbreak (...) must have been for the coastal proletariat an absolute negation of their human rights (p. 164).

To portray integrally portray the conflict over these rights in the banana age, the fictional literature developed during this period is very illustrative. Practically simultaneously, there is another line of protest in literature, provoked by Tiburcio Carías Andino's (1876-1969) dictatorship, who was elected president in 1932, but illegally extended his term by 16 years, until 1948. According to some authors<sup>35</sup>, his lengthy regime produced economic stability and normalcy in Honduras, but he concurrently unleashed a well-organized system of denouncement, persecution, and repression that is defined historically in three terrible words: confinement, exile and burial. His secret police served as the model for those of some future dictatorships<sup>36</sup>.

Under the reign of Carías all expressions of human rights were transgressed<sup>37</sup>. He violated basic democratic rights by staying in power without popular elections; in terms of gender, during his dictatorship the official advancements in favor of women, to which he denied the right to vote, were rare; the six indigenous towns that originated in that land, save the Mayas, who barely occupied and land in Honduras, were ignored; those who participated in syndicalism, were repressed; in terms of economic rights, he privileged friendly elites, especially the fruit companies, providing them with exemptions from paying taxes on imports, and leaving society without the slightest chance of benefitting from these transaction; in terms of communication, he imposed a censure on iron, and finally, on all humanistic and democratic forms of modernity, which Carías repeatedly violated.

It is the most extensive dictatorship that has ever occurred in Honduras but, as if society forgave his actions, he was passionately mourned after dying peacefully at his family estate in July 1969. Possibly because, despite all of his violations of human rights, he repected one: the overwhelming popular weariness which could no longer put up with him 1948.

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<sup>35</sup> Ver Cáceres y Zelaya. "Honduras. Seguridad productiva y crecimiento económico"...

<sup>36</sup> Inestroza. *Documentos clasificados*.

<sup>37</sup> Es abundante la literatura en torno a Carías. Básicamente se recomienda: Dodd. Tiburcio Carías. *Retrato*; Argueta. *Anatomía*; Krehm. *Democracia y tiranías*.

A contemporary exiled by Carías in Mexico, poet, Jacobo Cárcamo (1916-1959), con with flames of political anger, apostrofizes<sup>38</sup>:

From dark sepulchers  
A thousand fingers point at you,  
Indispensable satrap  
Laying on a bed of bayonets and blood,  
Manure in the history of my homeland.  
Half-breed Hirohito,  
Mussolini made of tin.

When one analyzes this type of social process, the feeling remains that the contempt for and violation of human rights has been the most consistent feature of history, but that is not the truth. The most extensive and permanent constant has been resistance to this violation.

In the biography of these towns, we always find people and organizations that fought to restore respect to the human condition, some going so far as to sacrifice themselves for this cause. In the same way, as a parallel, as I have demonstrated from the aesthetic perspective, there exist numerous artistic forms that exhibit and represent an ethical vibration of their historical contexts, including the social evolution of human rights. The painting, the sculpture, music, and finally, literature, among other arts, show, when analyzed properly, the climate of this issue among individuals and communities, as they warn with a cries of alarm and protest of the oppressed and disrespected in the rights, of the advances and setbacks, of the concept and predominant ideas, but above all, of the dynamism with which societies move in search of a greater arena of development for the rights of the individual, to the point that they be considered practically sacred.

In the fifty years following Carías regime, which concludes in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been many more literary authors in Honduras that, through direct or allusive methods, have made the defense of human rights their primary objective.

But that's another story, which, hopefully, we can discuss on a future occasion.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>38</sup> Sosa. *Poesía política*.

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