

## Culture



### **Tanya BASOK, *Keeping Heads Above Water: Salvadorean Refugees in Costa Rica*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993; 184 pages, \$34.95 (hardcover)**

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likely to be the key to the understanding of a whole community. Certainly, the closing chapter does touch on some broader issues — of “ethnicity of consent” as distinct from “ethnicity of descent”, of relations to the mother country, etc. — but the treatment is superficial and inadequate. Where an event has become, in many cases, a commodity, what has it to do with the persistence of Irishness? Where an Irish community celebrates in English an event which has for long ignored all the French-speaking Irish, what does it say about the nature of the ethnic experience in Québec?

Irish Quebeckers have reason to be proud of this book and they will no doubt respond enthusiastically to Leo McCullen’s urging, in the preface, that it be cherished. But scholars are likely to react differently and treat it with indifference or, at best, a source of reference for subsequent research.

Tanya BASOK, *Keeping Heads Above Water: Salvadorean Refugees in Costa Rica*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993; 184 pages, \$34.95 (hardcover).

By Anthony Winson  
University of Guelph

*Keeping Heads Above Water* attempts to embed an empirical evaluation of development aid to refugees displaced by civil war in Central America within the wider theoretical debates on the sociology of development and ways of conceptualizing small-scale enterprise. As the author notes, a central weakness of the relatively few independent critical studies of refugee assistance programs that do exist is their failure to link the evaluation of assistance programs to the global economic context within which they unfold (p.xvii).

Basok’s specific focus is the development assistance apparatus that attends to El Salvadorean refugees in Costa Rica, and the first part of her book gives the reader a good general background to the civil strife in El Salvador that has given rise to the plight of tens of thousands of Salvadoreans forced to flee the repression of their government’s military apparatus. Basok has a particularly informative discussion of the relevant characteristics of Costa Rica as a country of asylum. She deals with a range of issues from immigration and labour laws affecting refugees, to significant changes in the nation’s eco-

nomic fortunes during the 1980’s and how they affected national sentiments and policies regarding refugees within Costa Rican national territory. Finally, this study analyses the factors affecting the social integration of Salvadorean refugees into their host society, including an insightful discussion of the cultural differences between Salvadoreans and their Costa Rican cousins.

The core of the book is based on fieldwork on thirty-seven “durable solution” and thirty “local settlement” projects set up with foreign development assistance funds to aid Salvadorean refugees. These projects entailed the establishment of small-scale enterprise employing refugees. The author organizes her analysis of the success or failure of these enterprises along two main dimensions. The first examines the relationship of these enterprises to larger capitalist firms in the national economy to see whether the specific nature of this relationship is a major determinant of project viability. The second dimension explored relates to *internal* characteristics of the refugee enterprises.

Basok’s conclusions regarding determinants of refugee small-scale enterprise viability challenge some of our theoretical assumptions regarding the relationship between the capitalist sector of third world economies and non-capitalist enterprise. More significant for their viability than their relationship with the capitalist sector, however, were the internal aspects of the production process of these small enterprises. Especially important factors seen to be undermining the viability of these refugee projects were the paternalistic approach of the aid agencies funding them, and the failure to provide the necessary machinery and training for many of them. In her conclusion the author makes a number of policy recommendations that examine how future aid projects might overcome the barriers to the success of small-scale refugee enterprise uncovered by her study.

There are a few aspects of the study that this reviewer took issue with. For example, parts of the book rely substantially on Costa Rican newspaper sources, and while the author does caution the reader once or twice that the local press was uniformly conservative throughout the 1980’s, the author does not confront the whole issue of what really was happening to the Costa Rican media through this period. In fact, there is much evidence to indicate that a substantial sector of the local press was working closely under the direction of the CIA-Contra project

coordinating political propaganda and military operations against Nicaragua's Sandinista government from Costa Rican territory. At a certain point during the 1980's the Costa Rican press lost any sense of objectivity vis-a-vis popular struggles anywhere in Central America, including El Salvador, and this poses special problems for the scholar relying on such documentary sources to substantiate arguments related to the themes of this book.

The author also develops an interesting discussion on the relative merits of such concepts as the "informal sector" versus "petty commodity production" to understand the units of production she is studying. The author's preference to rescue the concept of the "informal sector" from its critics was not entirely convincing, however, and her arguments needed to be developed further than they were. All in all, these are not overly serious criticisms of a work that brings a refreshing dash of theoretical analysis to a field that is usually typified by rather narrowly conceived empirical evaluative studies. Students of the impact of development aid in whatever context, as well as the more general readership interested in Central American affairs, can definitely benefit from this book.

Melanie WIBER, *Politics, Property and Law in the Philippine Uplands*, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1993; 164 pages + tables, \$24.95 (paper).

Raul Perterra

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This short book is a good account of property concepts and practices among the Ibaloi, a complex society in the highlands of Northern Luzon, Philippines. The area inhabited by the Ibaloi is famous for its gold mines, a fact known since early Spanish times but whose details and control the Ibaloi managed to retain until the penetration of the Americans early this century.

Because of its proximity to the Spanish-controlled lowlands and its developed trade networks, the Ibaloi evolved a complex and stratified society based on gold and supplemented by cattle herding as well as wet-rice cultivation. Despite this complexity, the Ibaloi retained many of the egalitarian features of other societies in the Cordillera region, particularly the necessity of developing strong alli-

ance networks in the absence of effective structures of the state. However, as the Spanish colonial and American regimes exerted greater control over the area, ambitious individuals managed to obtain disproportionate resources, in part because of earlier understandings of communal access, but mostly because such individuals manipulated both local and national rules for their benefit.

Wiber sets out to explore the multi-layered meanings of property relations, particularly in relation to land and water resources. Along with gold, cash-cropping and cattle herding became significant sources of wealth. The proximity of large urban markets facilitated this exploitation but it is also exerting unbearable pressures on local society. Wiber examines the response of the Ibaloi to these pressures, pointing out that earlier accounts of the region were inadequate either in their detail or in their conceptual framework. The ideology of communalism so often encountered in contemporary descriptions of the region is shown to be of much later provenance as well as being empirically inaccurate. Like other Cordilleran peoples, the Ibaloi managed to retain original features of their society despite the significant encroachment of the colonial and post-colonial state. Concepts of property are an important element of local structure and Wiber successfully indicates how scarce resources are often manipulated according to distinct rules, to say nothing of expectations and notions of justice. Both indigenous and Western jural concepts are the result of particular interpretations in the context of the exercise of power.

This book is a useful contribution to the study of legal-jural concepts in Philippine society, an area which, despite Barton's early contributions, is often neglected in present accounts. However, despite its title, the account of politics is often wanting. Instead, Wiber gives a brief outline of political structures but very little indication of the way such structures actually operate. Since religion does not occur in the title, I did not expect to find much detail on its practice but given its importance, at least in former days, for determining status, a fuller account would have been helpful. Since several comparative studies of religion in the Cordillera region have been published, Wiber's discussion could have profited by referring to such studies. Similar comments could be made in relation to the economy, particularly since vegetable farming has been a major feature of Ibaloi society and since studies of similar communities in the Cordillera are available. The text is well-edited,