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BETWEEN DREAMED UNITY AND FRAGMENTED REALITY: POST-INDEPENDENCE CENTRAL AMERICA (1824-1839)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the complexities of the process of fragmentation of the Central American Federation (1824–1839), with an emphasis on the liberal reforms promoted by Francisco Morazán and the conservative resistances that were articulated in the post-independence period. From the confrontation between divergent political projects, the intra-oligarchic conflicts, regional disputes and social exclusions that marked the short federative experience are evident. In addition to examining the symbols, discourses, and institutions created to sustain republican unity, the study highlights the limits of Central American liberalism in the face of local sociopolitical realities, as well as the tensions between centralization and autonomy in the different states of the region.

Keywords: Political fragmentation. Central America. Borders and memories.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1821, the Captaincy General of Guatemala, until then under Spanish rule, declared its independence and was briefly annexed to the newly established Mexican Empire of Agustín de Iturbide. Two years later, in 1823, the region broke away from Mexico and formed the United Provinces of Central America, a federation composed of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica[3]. However, in 1838, this federation began to disintegrate, resulting in the formation of the independent states that make up contemporary Central America.

The events that marked the fragmentation of the Central American Federation (1824-1839) left political and social legacies that continue to impact the configurations of borders and identities in the region, reverberating in contemporary issues such as migrations and territorial disputes.

The National Constituent Assembly, installed in Guatemala on June 24, 1823, played a central role in this period of transition. Among his main actions, the drafting of the Federal Constitution of Central America, promulgated on November 22, 1824, stood out. This document, strongly influenced by the constitutions of the United States and Cadiz, as well as by the Enlightenment ideals of the eighteenth century, established the guidelines for the political and administrative organization of the new federation (Brignoli, 1983, p.28). However, the promising foundations outlined by the Assembly would soon be challenged by regional tensions and the divergent interests of local elites.

It was in this context that Francisco Morazán emerged as a prominent figure. Born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, on October 3, 1792, he became a military and political leader who embodied liberal ideals. During his presidency of the Central American Federation, he promoted progressive reforms inspired by the Livingston Codes, such as the legalization of divorce, the guarantee of inheritance rights for illegitimate children, and the implementation of a secular education. These measures, although visionary, faced strong resistance from conservative groups, mainly linked to the Catholic Church, who feared the erosion of traditional structures (Gudmunson, 1995, p.104).

Conservative opposition, fueled by regional tensions and distrust of the centralization of power, contributed to the collapse of the Federation in 1838. After a period of exile in

[3] Currently, Central America is made up of 20 countries, including the continental nations and several Caribbean islands. These countries are: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

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Colombia, Morazán attempted to regain his leadership in Central America, but was captured in Costa Rica and executed on September 15, 1842. His trajectory became a symbol of the contradictions between the republican ideal of unity and the fragmented reality of the region (Montes, 1958, p.47-50).

In this context, this article seeks to answer the following guiding question: what were the main political, social, and economic challenges faced by the Central American Federation in the post-independence period, and how did Francisco Morazán's leadership reflect the ideals and contradictions of the republican and liberal project in the region?

LIBERAL AND REPUBLICAN TOPICS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Compared to other Hispanic-American regions, such as Mexico and the countries of the Southern Cone, revolutionary processes in Central America received little attention. However, signs of desire for independence were already evident since 1811, in several locations of the then Kingdom of Guatemala. The first significant movement took place on November 5, 1811, in San Salvador, led by Fathers Matías Delgado and Nicolás Aguilar, as well as Manuel José Arce and other prominent figures.

In the following months, rebellions broke out in León and Granada in November and December. On January 1, 1812, Tegucigalpa rose up against the installation of peninsular municipal councilors. In 1813, secret meetings with revolutionary goals were held at the Convent of Belén in Guatemala, led by Fray Juan de la Concepción and figures such as José Francisco Barrundia. However, the formal independence of Central America was not proclaimed until September 15, 1821, at which time Francisco Morazán began to emerge as a central figure.

In 1824, Dionisio de Herrera, head of state of Honduras, appointed Francisco Morazán as Secretary General, recognizing his leadership qualities. Shortly thereafter, in 1825, the National Constituent Assembly of Honduras promulgated its first constitution, electing Morazán to the Representative Council. These events demonstrate Morazán's growing relevance in the Central American political scene.

After independence, two main parties emerged in Central America: the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party. The liberals, composed of economically prosperous sectors, sought greater political participation and redistribution of wealth and power. However, they were a heterogeneous group. In Guatemala, for example, they included both elites from peripheral areas and individuals from humble social backgrounds. Conservatives, on the

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other hand, defended the maintenance of colonial structures, often in alliance with the Church.

Despite ideological differences, both parties shared an aversion to popular participation in political processes. As Lowell Gudmunson (1995, p. 82) observes, "there was an occasionally scandalous tendency for individual leaders to switch sides." Over time, conservatives adopted originally liberal policies, such as the privatization of land and the promotion of exports, evidencing intra-oligarchic disputes.

In 1826, Manuel José Arce, liberal president of the Federation, surprised by allying himself with the conservatives, advocating a centralizing model that would transform Central America into a Unified Republic. This move deepened internal tensions, with Arce coming into conflict with leaders such as Juan Barrundia, head of the Guatemalan state. The friction culminated in the dissolution of the Federal Senate and Arce's invasion of Honduras and El Salvador, an episode that catapulted Morazán to notoriety as a defender of Honduras.

The civil war, which began in 1826, revealed latent conflicts. Guatemalan conservatives, aligned with the Church, opposed the republican ideals of the liberals. While independence speeches preached equality and inclusion, local divisions and class identities thwarted these goals. Indigenous and peasant populations remained marginalized, while elites maintained historical privileges (Díaz Arias, 2021, p. 15).

The liberal victory in 1829, with the election of Morazán in 1830, highlighted conflicting projects. Liberal reforms, such as confiscating Church property and strengthening the federal government, faced resistance. The absence of a defined federal capital also intensified tensions, especially between provinces such as Nicaragua and Costa Rica, which sought greater autonomy. Surrounded by local rivalries, the Executive was unable to build an efficient administrative functionality, reflecting a Federation incapable of creating, despite the political discourse, a national unity. Striking examples of this failure were the absence of a federal district and the competition between the army and the caudillos of each city-state. According to Guatemalan historian Arturo Taracena (1995), this territorial fragmentation led states to close themselves in their own limits, revaluing the role of borders and consolidating local dominant elites, which sought legitimacy both internally and externally. Thus, each territory began to organize its own political communities, reinforcing divisions to the detriment of a unified project of Federation.

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The struggle between liberals and conservatives in Central America cannot be reduced to a simple ideological dichotomy. It is an intra-oligarchic dispute marked by local economic and political interests, which shaped the first years of independence. Morazán, in trying to balance these forces, has become a symbol of both unity and polarization:

> Last year, a school of first letters was established in this city by the Lancaster method. In a general examination, surprising progress was noted and its advantages were palpated. The President of the Republic, the Deputy Head of the State of Guatemala, representative officials, and several citizens participated in the examination (Official Bulletin of May 1, 183).

The issue of maintaining federative unity permeated precisely the latent disagreement between the political elites, triumphant in the process of independence, about the distribution of federal power and the rights and responsibilities of the different states" (Diáz Arias, 2021, p.20). Elites that were, in fact, the same, now under a new organization, of the colonial period: already in exile, they mobilized a series of terms against their perpetrators that refer to the colonial past:

> Because in 1812, when the rights of Americans were first discussed, you acted as unjust judges, vile informers, and false witnesses against the friends of the independence of absolute government. It is not your fatherland: Because when the ideas of liberty triumphed in the mother country, when the Spanish patriots broke some links in the heavy chain of our slavery, thus revealing to us what we were and what we could be, you conspired against the constitutional government established throughout the monarchy. As enemies of enlightenment, they collaborated with those who then intended to free themselves from the government of the Cortes and transfer to America the absolute government of the Bourbons Jiménez Solís, 1952, p. 203).

The Manifesto of David[4] was written in 18421, during his exile. With an eloquent and passionate tone, he constituted the desire to restore the federative unity of the region. It broadcasts accusations against the conservatives that Morazán considered responsible for the disintegration of the Federal Republic of Central America. While leaders such as Morazán defended a republican, liberal and unitary model, other sectors, mainly conservative and linked to the Catholic Church, resisted, preferring models that preserved hierarchical structures inherited from the colonial period. Resistance to centralism, coupled with the inability to reconcile regional demands and external pressures, led to the collapse of the federation in 1838. Morazán, an emblematic leader of liberalism and defender of unity, was defeated and exiled. In 1842, after spending a period in Colombia and Costa

[4] Jiménez Solís, J. Jorge. Francisco Morazán, his life and his work. Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1952.

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Rica, he sought to regain political leadership and reverse the fragmentation of Central America. The Manifiesto de David, written in this context, served as a declaration of intent and a vigorous denunciation of his political opponents.

Morazán saw as enemies of progress those who resisted enlightenment and social advancement, associating them with the interests of the colonial period. His reforms, although considered progressive, faced resistance from conservatives, clergy and popular sectors who saw them as irrelevant. These measures exposed the limitations of the liberal project in meeting popular demands, making liberals the target of criticism. Regarding the first civil war, Morazán attributed to Manuel José Arce the main responsibility for the conflicts, denouncing him as one of the central agents in the political instability that marked the region.

> Arce followed the example of so many Greeks who joined the enemies of their homeland to fight it and suffered, like them, the deserved punishment of his own defeat and the double curse of defeated foreign mercenaries and their victorious fellow citizens (Jiménez Solís, 1952, p. 206).

In this passage, Morazán uses a historical analogy, comparing Arce to the traitors of Ancient Greece who allied themselves with foreign powers against their own homeland. This direct criticism reflects the context of internal disputes in which local leaders, instead of working for federative unity, sought external or absolutist alliances to strengthen their own regional agendas, contributing to the political and social fragmentation of Central America.

During the period from 1837 to 1838, a new civil war broke out, marked by the significant mobilization of indigenous communities, encouraged by the Church. Politically ignored, the indigenous people had no space in liberal projects, while conservative sectors, such as the clergy, sought to get closer to these communities. For both groups, the indigenous people were often treated as mere pawns in a power game. This invisibility can be observed in the Constitution, which does not include references to indigenous peoples. The constitutional document presents a model of State based on the principles of sovereignty, independence and fundamental rights of freedom, equality, security and property, applicable to all inhabitants of the republic, without considering their ethnic or cultural origins. In fact, the text of the constitution begins as follows:

> Gathered in the National Constituent Assembly, we, the representatives of the people of Central America, in compliance with their wishes and in the exercise of their sovereign rights, decree the following Constitution to promote their happiness; to guarantee the maximum possible enjoyment of their capacities; to ensure the rights of man and of the citizen on the basis of the unalterable principles of liberty,

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> equality, security and property; to establish public order; and to form a perfect federation (*Oficial*, *Constitución de la República Federal de Centro-América*, 1956).

An evident aspect, in addition to the invisibility of indigenous peoples, is the exclusion of women from the exercise of citizenship. The criteria for being a citizen were easily met by adult men: "citizens are all inhabitants of the Republic, born in the country, or naturalized in it, who are married or over eighteen years of age, provided that they exercise some useful profession or have known means of subsistence". Linked to the domestic sphere, women rarely performed "useful professions" that allowed them to meet these requirements.

The omission of indigenous peoples and gender issues reflects a trend in Latin American constitutions of the nineteenth century, which sought to form unified and homogeneous states. Citizenship was defined around a generalist concept of "people" and "citizens", ignoring the cultural and ethnic diversity that characterized indigenous populations. This effort at national integration often resulted in the invisibility of social and cultural specificities, perpetuating the marginalization of these groups in the political and legal processes of the new republic.

Liberal ideals of nationality and national identity faced difficulties in dealing with the abyss between the Hispanic minority with the right to vote and the indigenous masses, politically invisible, but active in resisting social exclusion. This contrast accompanied the discourses of freedom and prosperity in Central America.

With the resignation of Francisco Morazán as president in 1839, the collapse of the Central American Federation followed, marking the beginning of a conservative period that Halperin Donghi describes as a "long wait." Overall, both winners and losers expressed disappointment with the limited political and material progress achieved.

The categories "conservative" and "liberal" must be analyzed within their contexts, as they are not transhistorical concepts. They emerge from specific historical interests that gave them origin and meaning. In addition, adopting European models as a parameter can lead to frustration and, ultimately, to interpretative paralysis.

The debate over whether the transformations in the first decades of independence in Central America can be called "revolutions" highlights, in historiography, an emphasis on what these processes were not: without organized labor labor, industrialization, or cohesive social classes, many argue that they did not constitute true revolutions. However, this view neglects the basic principles of material causality and ignores how Central American

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subjects perceived and experienced these processes. The popular classes, at most, are portrayed as misguided, alternating their support between liberal and conservative projects, without their own experiences being properly recognized.

On the other hand, it is not appropriate to praise or condemn the disputes in the political arena. The conflicts between liberals and conservatives, as Lowell Gudmunson (1995, p. 82) points out, can be interpreted as an intra-class struggle between elites and aspiring elites in the city-states, in which political control was exercised through party banners. This view is corroborated by the analyses of Safford (1978), who point out that the political divisions in independent Spanish America were marked by groups close to the colonial centers of privilege that supported the conservative cause, while the marginalized sectors of central power gravitated around the liberal side.

From this perspective, the conflicts that characterized the city-states can be seen as disputes of intra-oligarchic interests, with Guatemala and San Salvador playing central roles. However, this does not exclude the active participation of popular segments, which resisted the alternation of power between liberals and conservatives. The *low-end* ones, however, confronted both liberal and conservative projects that ultimately did not serve their interests.

In order to maintain the status quo, the differences between the party groups were often diluted, especially when it came to preventing the struggles of the dominated sectors. This tacit alignment demonstrates how ideological disputes often served to mask the underlying class interests that united elites at critical moments.

UNIONIST SYMBOLS

The rise of the liberals to power in the first decades of independence was accompanied by symbols that sought to represent the union between the peoples of the region. However, as already discussed, this union was far from being achieved in practice.

The symbols of the Central American Federation reflected lofty ideals such as sovereignty, equality, and freedom, but they also concealed the underlying exclusions and inequalities. Among them, the emblem of the "Provincias Unidas del Centro de América" and the flag of the Federal Republic of Central America stand out, which sought to consolidate a sense of common belonging. The symbol features five mountains, representing the five founding provinces of the Federation: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. At the top of the mountains, there is a triangle

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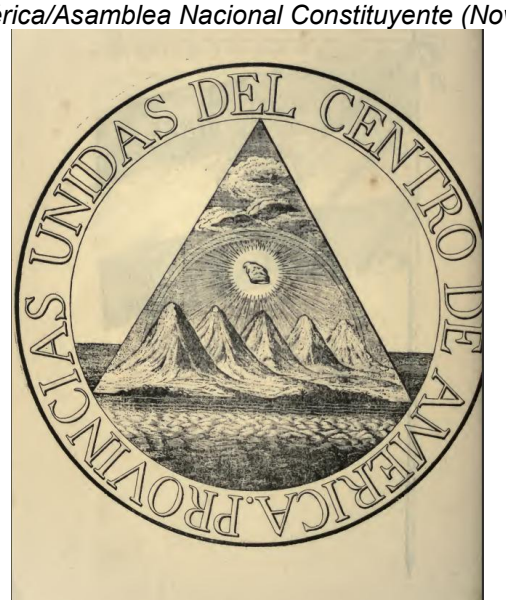
illuminated by a beam of light, with a central figure that symbolizes the ideals of freedom and unity.

Figure I. Coat *of Arms of the United Provinces of Central America (1824).* Source: *Constitución de la República Federal de Centro-América/Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (November 22, 1824).*



The mountains evoke the geography of the region and the idea of solidity and unity. The isthmian condition, that is, the character of a territorial bridge between two continents, became a central element in the construction of national identity. The beam of light above the mountains is interpreted as a sign of hope and prosperity for the young federation.

The identity marks that the formulators of the Central American Federation tried to imprint on the nation were related to civic-political values. They sought to emphasize principles such as popular sovereignty, citizen equality, freedom of the press and the binomial individual security/property (Taracena, 1995, p. 47).

Another essential aspect in the cultural construction efforts was the emphasis on geography as a criterion of belonging: in the Central American isthmus, being considered part of the nation depended on residing in the region, disregarding factors such as ethnicity and gender. In other words, the exclusion of indigenous people and women was masked by a conception, reflected in the Constitution, that all inhabitants of the territory should be part of this new national identity called Central America.

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Figure 2. Flag of the United Provinces of Central America (1824) with the motto 'Dios, Unión, Libertad / *Flag of the United Provinces of Central America (1824) with the motto 'God, Union, Liberty'*. Source: Constitución de la República Federal de Centro-América/Asamblea Nacional Constituyente (November 22, 1824).

The flag of the Federal Republic of Central America reflects the central ideals of the federation, which was formed after independence from Spain. The inscription "Dios. Union. Libertad." (God. Union. Freedom.) it symbolizes the fundamental values defended by the Republic: religious faith, unity among Central American states, and newly won freedom from colonial rule.

The letters "B. N." at the bottom of the flag possibly refer to an official institution, such as the "National Bank", highlighting the relevance of a central entity in the economic organization of the federation.

In this way, the flag of the Federal Republic of Central America goes beyond being a mere territorial representation. It conveys a message of unity, hope and shared aspirations for autonomy and progress for the states that have been part of the federation.

However, the memories associated with these symbols and the ideals of unity are often reinterpreted in the political contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Social movements, especially those fighting for social justice and human rights, often invoke the legacy of Morazán and the Central American Federation as inspiration for building alternative projects of governance and regional integration. On the other hand, narratives that exalt federative ideals often ignore the social and cultural exclusions that have marked the historical experience, perpetuating divisions that still affect the region.

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FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In 1838, when Congress decided to transfer control of customs revenues to the federal government – the only viable measure to guarantee the necessary resources – the process of disintegration of the Central American Federation began. Nicaragua was the first to opt for separation, followed by Costa Rica and Honduras. Francisco Morazán, faced with this scenario of fragmentation and growing pressures, resigned the presidency in February 1839, symbolically marking the end of one of the most ambitious projects of republican unity in the region.

The fragmentation of the Central American Federation and resistance to liberal reforms reflect political dynamics that continue to influence the states of the region. The failure to build effective unity has left deep marks on Central America's political and economic structures, consolidating regional rivalries and hindering the formation of cohesive national identities. Liberals and conservatives, although they appeared to be on opposite sides, shared more similarities than differences: both operated as localist political oligarchies, aimed at preserving privileges and often masking class interests under the rhetoric of a unified federation.

These disputes, marked by intra-class rivalries, also highlight the limitations of the political projects of the period. Liberals and conservatives, by excluding indigenous and peasant populations from political deliberations, perpetuated unequal structures inherited from the colonial period. This exclusion, coupled with economic hardship, aggravated social tensions and political instability, contributing to a cycle of civil wars and disintegration that shaped the region's history.

Finally, it is crucial to consider the socio-political specificities of each city-state in this context. While the ideal of a unified federation remained an aspiration of reformist elites like Morazán, in practice, regional interests and mutual distrust between the states undermined any attempt at unity. The trajectory of the Central American Federation illustrates not only the challenges of building a national identity in a territory marked by diversity, but also the contradictions inherent in the liberal projects of the nineteenth century.

Despite its collapse, the experience of the Central American Federation and the legacy of Francisco Morazán continue to offer valuable reflections on the dilemmas of sovereignty, governance, and regional integration. Morazán, executed in 1842, became a symbol of the aspirations for unity and freedom that, although not realized in his time, still resonate in contemporary political struggles in Central America.

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The Central American Federation's analysis, therefore, is not limited to the nineteenth century, but offers valuable insights for understanding contemporary challenges related to borders, regional identities, and collective memory. Recent conflicts, such as territorial disputes and migration crises, not only echo the region's historical divisions, but also underscore the importance of revisiting these processes to inform current debates on integration and sovereignty in Central America.

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