
The subtitle of this book accurately describes its scope. It is an “Estudio sobre la población y los modos de organización de las economías, las sociedades y los espacios geográficos” of Panama, applying the latest techniques developed in France. The Isthmus has been since the coming of the Europeans a route between the oceans. Each technology has developed its own population density: movement by packtrain a very low one, the railroad a greater one, and the canal, large populations centered in Panama City and Colón. Alongside the population dependent on transit, there has grown up in the rest of the Isthmus initially very sparse settlement by mixed-bloods of three races initially living through subsistence slash-and-burn agriculture and a limited amount of stockraising. Their major contribution to the economy of transit was meat. They have been steadily on the increase—Jaén Suárez argues very strongly against the conception of the ravages of tropical diseases among acclimated people. Only in the last decades of the nineteenth century has the rural population developed crops of importance in the world market such as bananas and sugar. In addition, the rural shift from maize to rice has been reflected in the cities.

Long sections of the study examine information on population that might be gleaned from the sources now dear to French historical demographers, namely, parish registers, cadastral surveys, local counts, and fiscal records. For the Isthmus they are scanty indeed until well into the eighteenth century. Parish registers cannot be used for family reconstruction; the gaps in the records because of faulty keeping and the simple fact that most of the population never married force a considerable amount of adjustment even in aggregative use.

That the Panamanian population, rural and urban, lived in a class system will come as a surprise to no one. Large landholdings did not come into existence until the eighteenth and even more the nineteenth centuries. It is only in comparatively recent decades that non-urban land has begun to have value; in the earliest decades of the colony, rural wealth was counted in livestock.

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