

The United Fruit Company and the United States Squash Guatemala's Attempt at Democracy for
the Sake of "Democracy"

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The rise of the banana industry in the United States occurred during the post-World War II era and at the beginning and amid the Second Red Scare. In the thick of this time of change and upheaval, the United Fruit Company (UFCO) was growing in power and influence and, along with the United States government, was becoming increasingly vigilant of any hint of communist influence. Their anti-communist fervor was rooted in a commercial imperialism that disagreed with popular land reform of various Latin American countries. This thirst for power mixed with an anti-communist urge birthed a discrepancy between the anxieties and cares about Latin America from a United States and UFCO perspective, who cared mostly about economic gain, global power, and a narrow idea of democracy, versus from the perspective of Latin Americans and Latin American leaders themselves, who cared about justice for their people, their nations' sovereignty, and unfettered attempts at democracy. In this paper, I am going to explore this discrepancy through an American banana commercial in contrast to testimonies from Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz from the text *Bitter Fruit*. I am going to highlight how UFCO and United States misinterpreted Guatemala's democratic practices as communism and how their imposition of their idea of democracy violated the sovereignty of Guatemala and the principles of democracy.

The video advertisement "Chiquita Banana and the Cannibals" was produced by John Sutherland as an introduction of the banana to the American population.¹ At the beginning of the commercial, a racist caricature of a man of dark complexion is portrayed with enlarged lips, preparing to cook and eat a British man, sporting an explorer's hat and an eyeglass. Lo and behold, Chiquita Banana comes traipsing in, just in the nick of time. She is depicted as a very

¹ John Sutherland, "Chiquita Banana and the Cannibals", 1947, John Sutherland Productions.

attractive part human, part banana, and after she stops the man from cooking the other guy alive, she sings, “If you’d like to be refined and civilized, your eating habits really ought to be revised,” after which she goes on to narrate a recipe for banana scallops.² There are a lot of moving parts, and I am going to explain a few of them, specifically in regard to our context of the domination of UFCO and the Second Red Scare in the United States.

Based on the power dynamics between characters, there is a clear portrayal of who is the “most civilized”³ and able to be trusted and is, thus, the most powerful. The African man is deemed a cannibal, viewed as entirely backward and uncivilized, while the British man is illustrated as clueless and powerless, showing neither an attempt to escape or the capacity to escape nor resistance to being cooked at all. Contrarily, Chiquita Banana, who speaks with a generic United States’ accent, swoops in to save the day, asserting that the U.S. is doing the right thing by asserting her dominance and civilizing people in Latin America. This power dynamic contends that even developed, Westernized nations like Great Britain, are backward and brainless in their attempts to engage with Latin America countries and that the only sufficient and forward-thinking approach to enacting power in Latin America is to force American democratic principles and ideals onto these countries and people groups, regardless of if that is what the people want or not. Little does this commercial demonstrate, however, is how UFCO and the United States were truly asserting their power in Latin America.

Shifting our focus to Guatemala during the presidency of Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954), we see a democratically elected leader advocating for socialist reforms, specifically land reform, in order to expand the rights of the peasant class. He is met by much resistance from the United Fruit Company and, because of the eventual collusion between the United States government and

² Ibid.

³ From the Western perspective.

U.S. corporations, resistance from United States government officials. With this in mind, we see a series of attacks on Guatemala, attempting to drive out President Arbenz. The first of these bombardments was the dropping of leaflets asserting “Guatemala’s President, Jacobo Arbenz, must resign immediately”, signed by “National Liberation Forces”, aiming to stir fear and unrest among civilians.⁴ Soon thereafter, P-47s, a novelty to any Latin American Air Force, began firing down and dropping fragmentation bombs on Guatemala City.⁵ Following two days of air attacks, a stressed and exhausted Arbenz addresses the country, speaking of his disdain of the collusion of the “arch-traitor” Carlos Castillo Armas, the United Fruit Company, and the United States government.⁶ In his address Arbenz pleads, “Our crime is having enacted agrarian reform which affected the interests of the United Fruit Company. Our crime is wanting to have our own route to the Atlantic, our own electric power and our own docks and ports. Our crime is our patriotic wish to advance, to progress, to win economic independence to match our political independence. We are condemned because we have given our peasant population land and rights”.⁷ He goes on to declare that it is not the communists that are taking power, but it is Castillo Armas and “other greedy servants of the foreign companies” who are trying to undemocratically seize power of the government.⁸ In this run of events, the right-wing, US-allied Castillo Armas was upset with the popular, progressive reforms of Arbenz, so much that he authorized full-fledged attacks on Guatemala. UFCO would proceed to lobby the United States government to hop on board with their efforts to unseat President Arbenz because of his progressive reforms.

⁴ Stephen Schlesinger, Stephen Kinzer, and John H. Coatsworth, *Bitter Fruit* (Harvard University: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2005), 7-8.

⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 20.

Yet, when we return to the Chiquita Banana commercial, we are met with a euphemized version of the happenings in Guatemala and the rest of Latin America. At the same time that the United States was presenting bananas as a delicious and nutritious snack, it was also supporting the violent anti-communist movement in Guatemala through its backing of the United Fruit Company. In the Chiquita Banana advertisement, the banana industry is presented as a means to help uncivilized people, spread U.S. interests abroad, and introduce a tasty new food to the American diet. In this way, UFCO and the United States were masking their true intentions, which were to squash an incorrectly identified communist movement in Guatemala and eliminate anything that might be jeopardizing the economic success of UFCO, even if it meant ousting a democratically elected president. Since Guatemala's progressive land reforms did not align with rigorous growth of the UFCO, the company conflated the reforms with a communist overthrow, and effectively "tried to convince the American government that Arbenz was a threat to freedom and must be disposed".⁹ Accordingly, UFCO hired "a corps of influential lobbyists and talented publicists to create a public and private climate in the United States favorable to Arbenz's overthrow".¹⁰ This exchange emphasizes the collusion between large, U.S.-owned corporations and how involved the United States was in Arbenz's eventual overthrow. Yet, when we listen to the cries of President Arbenz during this time, he is not promoting communism or even aligning himself with communism. His attempts to execute his role as a democratically elected leader and advocate for progressive economic reform were misidentified as communist efforts and ultimately resulted in him being unseated from his presidency. In an address to the people of Guatemala, after fifteen days of attacks on Guatemala, President Arbenz addresses his people as, "Workers, peasants, patriots, and my friends," and says, "The United Fruit Company, in

⁹ Ibid, 77.

¹⁰ Ibid.

collaboration with the governing circles of the United States, is responsible for what is happening to us... They have used the pretext of anti-communism. The truth is very different. The truth is to be found in the financial interests of the fruit company and the other U.S. monopolies which have invested greatest amounts of money in Latin American and fear that the example of Guatemala would be followed by other Latin countries...”¹¹

The United States’ choice in siding with UFCO in Guatemalan intervention choice asserts that they were more interested in “unquestioning allies than democratic ones”.¹² The U.S. failed to recognize that democracy is not homogeneous and asserted their idea of democracy as the one and only option of its practice. In doing so, the U.S. violated the sovereignty, stability, and integrity of Guatemala. Through sowing the seeds of discord to the eventual ousting of a democratically elected president, UFCO and the United States’ collaboration and intervention in Latin America was calculated and caused much harm and disruption to the country. While this is a contemporary analysis of the situation, the United States likely thought they were doing a humanitarian thing by intervening in Guatemala’s practice of democracy, asserting that the Latin American people did not know what they were doing or understand democracy correctly. This idea is confirmed in the Chiquita Banana commercial in the portrayal of people group’s actions in Latin America being primitive or backward, with only the United States knowing how to save the day. Also through the commercial, UFCO and the United States not only use the banana industry as a tool for commercial imperialism but also as a civilizing agent, portraying this starchy, bland, calorically dense food as something to enlighten the, from their perspective, vulgar and uncultured people in Latin America. In this way, the United States saw themselves as saving and protecting Latin America from their own demise.

¹¹ Ibid, 199.

¹² Ibid, 254.

The connection between the Chiquita Banana commercial and the account offered in the text *Bitter Fruit* is significant because they confirm the United States' hypocrisy in their approach to democracy. Per the commercial, the United States does not have confidence in the agency or intellectual ability of people in Latin America. Additionally, the depiction of an African man implies that the United States thought similarly of African nations, too. By way of the U.S.'s collusion and actions associated with UFCO, the U.S. appears to believe that Latin Americans would not know communism if it slapped them in the face. On the other hand, from Jacobo Arbenz's account as quoted in *Bitter Fruit*, it is clear that Guatemalans were truly interested in practicing democracy, and Arbenz wanted what he thought best for his people. However, because it did not follow the U.S.'s very narrow idea of democracy, it was silenced, squashed, and left to the devices of often un-democratic, militaristic leaders interested in single-minded authoritarian power and not listening to the voices of the people. Based on these actions, it is evident that the United States was not interested in unfettered democracy after all, but rather paternalistic control and economic gain masked as humanitarian intervention and commercial venture.

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