Photographs of a Prayer

The (Neglected) Visual Archive and Latin American Labor History

Kevin Coleman
Assistant Professor of History
University of Toronto

This essay was published as "Photographs of a Prayer: The (Neglected) Visual Archive and Latin American Labor History." Hispanic American Historical Review, 95, no. 3 (2015): 459-492.

Figure 1. Courtesy of the Rafael Platero Paz Archive.

Drawing on photographs of the 1954 banana workers’ strike in Honduras, this article seeks to demonstrate the potential of the visual archive for recovering the historical agency of the working class. Photos from the archive of a studio photographer named Rafael Platero Paz enable me to rethink the role of United Fruit Company workers in staging an event that brought the Honduran worker into being as a new political subject. The fact that every photograph is its
own certificate of a that-was-there can be drawn upon to radically historicize moments when the shutter opened to capture a particular image. After attending to the ways that the striking workers self-consciously and photographically asserted themselves—as employees, citizens, and devout Catholics—I outline a methodological framework for historians of Latin America who wish to engage with photographs, a source material of unique evidentiary and poetic force.

Sometime in May 1954, Fr. Joseph D. Wade, a Jesuit priest from the United States who served in El Progreso, Honduras, addressed the striking banana workers who had gathered in the Ramón Rosa Plaza, a small urban park with a giant German-made clock atop an elevated gazebo. The rotunda from which he spoke was the architectural focal point of the offices of the municipal government on one side of the plaza and the stores of various Palestinian merchants that lined its other sides. As Fr. Wade addressed the workers, a local photographer named Rafael Platero Paz took a picture of him. His clerical garb, age, nationality, and assumed learnedness conveyed authority.

As a document, this picture is evidence of Fr. Wade’s presence during the strike. His memoirs supplement this image, retrospectively describing his experience of the 69 days when the banana workers withheld their labor. Platero Paz’s social documentary photograph also hints at the theatrical and public nature of the strike. This priest was not in his church, addressing parishioners from the altar. He was in the civic space of the Ramón Rosa Plaza. Part of the event-character of the strike was that it was staged as a spectacle, as a series of acts that were meant to be seen locally, nationally, and internationally. The 1954 strike was a declaration of independence performed by and for the workers. The force of that declaration was multiplied when a dispersed community of spectators could see the plight of these people and hear their
demands; likewise, it was blunted by lack of exposure, by the fact that they toiled anonymously, by the fact that US consumers of bananas had no idea who produced the fresh fruit that they ate without so much as a second thought. Hence the strike was also staged for the camera, which duplicated the workers’ acts of collective self-rule and made their demands visible to others beyond the immediate scene.

Photographs of the 1954 strike called forth a new reality. They did so by denouncing an unjust situation and by enacting and demanding, in the photographic present and for the future, an alternative set of economic and social relations. I will argue that it is “the perhaps,” the yet-to-come, that can be seen in the images that Platero Paz made of workers during the strike against the Boston-based company. But I will also suggest that these photographs reveal something more than the yet-to-come. These strike photos emphatically announce the “here already” of new political subjects creating a vantage point on their own situation and a differently arranged space in which to live and work together. Platero Paz’s photographs of the 1954 strike are thus image objects that have encoded, in addition to the that-has-been, two additional temporalities: the here already and the yet-to-come. Both of these effect a break, rejecting the order of the past in which workers simply accepted their lot as the time of yesterday, the time that fruit company managers sought to bring back. Thus the uncertainty about whether or not the workers would be able to maintain their heterotopic space of collective self-governance also permeates these photographs, especially a photo of the workers praying reverently at an outdoor Mass in the Ramón Rosa Plaza.¹

¹I am grateful to Aída López de Castillo, whose dedication to caring for her father’s photographs made this project possible. In preparing this article, I benefited from the insights of Daniel James, Sebastián Carassai, Jens Andermann, William Fysh, Elspeth Brown, Jeffrey L. Gould, David Díaz Arias, Dario A. Euraque, Marvin Barahona, Daniel E. Bender, Mairi Cowan, Justin Wolfe, Jane Lyle, and Hema Ganapathy, as well as the editors of HAHR, the three peer
The Visual Archive and Latin American Labor History

Despite the fact that the study of the visual has exploded in recent years, it has been late in arriving in Latin American and Caribbean history per se. Over the past two decades, scholars in academic departments of literature, anthropology, and art history have written the most important works in this field, contributing the analytic of “visual economies,” rethinking the performance of state power as a mode of seeing, tracking down the flow of tropicalizing images, and demonstrating how photography was made to err by Brazilian and Mexican modernists. Back in 2004, the Hispanic American Historical Review published a special issue with three articles by historians who were sensitive to the specificities of visual culture. But what looked like a promising start has yet to be built upon. Against the scarcity of historically-minded studies of photography in Latin America, I can think of only one notable exception and that is John Mraz’s rigorous genealogy of the images and image-makers of the Mexican Revolution. In my view, if the study of photography and photographs is to find a place in Latin American history, then it will need to grapple with the methods and insights that the broader field of visual studies has produced over the past 30 years.

Since the 1820s and the advent of what was deemed a means for writing with light, the

reviewers, and Sean Mannion.
1 For the purposes of this article, I am setting aside the question of circulation to focus on the photograph as a unique kind of historical document. I analyze photojournalistic images of the 1954 strike, including those printed in Life and Bohemia magazines, in Coleman, Camera, chap. 8.
2 These contributions were made by Poole, Vision; Andermann, Optic; Thompson, Eye; Gabara, Errant Modernism.
3 Coronil, “Can the Subaltern See?”; James and Lobato, “Family Photos, Oral Narratives, and Identity Formation”; Poole, “An Image of ‘Our Indian’”; and Grandin, “Can the Subaltern Be Seen?” Robert M. Levine was the first historian to systematically treat photographs from Latin America as documents in their own right: Levine, Images.
4 Mraz, Photographing.
seemingly direct and uncoded nature of photographic representation has perplexed viewers, who once marveled at the exactness of machine-made images. Unlike the written word or painting, the argument goes, photographs are indexical—they point to an object at which a camera was pointed at a given instant. In other words, while the meaning or truth of a photo is always open and can never be fixed once and for all, the fact that each photograph testifies to a particular moment in the past is indisputable. And it is the temporal structure of photographs—they are always of somebody’s present—that invites us to enter into the past in new ways. Photographs beckon the beholder to identify what has been pictured and to link it with other people, places, objects, and events. Each of us, as we look at our childhood photos in search of who we once were, does this kind of identificatory work. Lovers, parents, and the police use images in the same way.

Hence this medium that seems to have a privileged relation to reality also has egalitarian potential. Photographs can be readily interpreted, honored, or defaced. Beyond the immediate scene in which a photo is produced, people in other places and times can reengage that image and the moment to which it testifies. Furthermore, as the art and science of photography expanded with nineteenth-century imperialism, this cheap and increasingly simple technology soon put self-representation within nearly everyone’s reach. Photography, to be sure, is not neutral. In all places, workers have been subjected to a disciplinary gaze that seeks to speed them up or slow them down, and to steer what they say and do. Yet photography has also allowed

---

5 The debate goes back to Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot; the foundational contemporary texts are Barthes, “Rhetoric”; Barthes, Camera Lucida. Margaret Olin challenges prevailing interpretations of Barthes’s notion of indexicality and instead suggests that “we endow [photographs] with attributes we need them to have.” She argues that “the most significant indexical power of the photograph may consequently lie . . . in the relation between the photograph and its beholder, or user, in what I would like to call a ‘performative index,’ or an ‘index of identification.’” See Olin, “Touching Photographs,” 85.

6 Baer, Spectral Evidence, 7.
workers to represent themselves and to call on others to join them in solidarity. In many cases, people who otherwise left exceedingly few records of their lives still show up in photographs as authors of their own images, standing or sitting as they wished to be seen by others.

With an immediacy that can lull us into forgetting the very constructedness of the image, photos disclose ways in which ordinary people conducted themselves, if only for a split second, in their own present. Hence the photograph must be critically interpreted as part of a larger visual field that conditions what can be seen, said, and done in any given historical conjuncture. The unique temporality of photographic representation invites us to radically historicize, suspending our knowledge of what happened after the event of making a picture and entering into the moment that it documents. Platero Paz’s photos of the 1954 strike, for instance, show how workers dramatically reworked old repertoires and invented new ones, setting in firm relief the mechanisms and spaces of neocolonial corporate rule through their decolonial acts of self-poiesis.

As an artisan and entrepreneur, Rafael Platero Paz worked in El Progreso from 1926 to 1983, photographically documenting everything from children receiving their first communion to local political rallies. With his pictures, he enabled a racially and ethnically diverse labor force, as well as women, subsistence farmers, and children, to inscribe themselves as honorable, respectable participants in the construction of a new national imaginary. When he died, Platero Paz left everything—including ten large cardboard boxes, each containing prints and several thousand negatives, as well as three of his old cameras, some lenses, receipts, and other equipment—to his daughter, Profesora Aída López de Castillo. Sitting on her back porch, I digitized nearly 2,000 negatives and a couple hundred prints as Profesora Aída went through the scanned images to find people that she recognized. This archive contains traces of ephemeral
practices and subaltern acts of self-making that are simply not found in written documents or oral history interviews.

Drawing on Platero Paz’s photographs of the 1954 banana workers’ strike in Honduras, I would like to demonstrate the potential that the visual archive holds for recovering the historical agency of the working class.⁷ These photos enable me to rethink the role of fruit company workers in staging an event that quite literally brought the Honduran worker into being as a new political subject. The fact that every photograph is its own certificate of a that-was-there can be drawn upon to radically historicize moments when the shutter opened to capture a particular image on light-sensitive material. After attending to the ways that the striking workers self-consciously and photographically asserted themselves, as employees and as citizens, I will outline a methodological framework for historians of Latin America who wish to engage with photographs, a source material of unique evidentiary and poetic force.

“*A New Spirit Began to Appear among the Men*”

From distinct ideological positions, the gamut of sources—official, testimonial, and photographic—bears witness to a new way of thinking that the banana workers were creating. Some feared it. Others embraced it. Among the former, Fr. Wade reflects: “About six months before the strike, a new spirit began to appear among the men. They were meeting in small groups, planning secretly, complaining, conceiving new ideas of better conditions of work, of hours, of wages, prices of clothes and food.”⁸ Among the latter, labor leader Julio César Rivera

---

⁷ For one of the earliest attempts to critically engage photos to write working-class history, see Sekula, *Photography*.
recalls that workers were already predisposed to fight for their rights before leftist organizers arrived in the banana camps: “When we went to the banana plantations to talk with the workers, there was already a fighting spirit within the laborer and a desire to organize.”

Newspapers reported that Central America was “convulsing.” The United Fruit Company and the US government went on red alert. Photographers grabbed their cameras and ran to the scenes of the strike.

Each of these sources also reports on the workers’ encampments in front of United Fruit’s offices in the American Zone, where the company’s employees lived, and at the Ramón Rosa Plaza, in front of the town hall. Fr. Wade recalls the massive gatherings:

The strike continued during all the month of May. Every day the leaders ordered a mass meeting at the raised platform which was in front of the main office of the Company, in the south part of town, and near the railroad bridge across the Río Pelo. There would gather some eight or nine thousand men and women, not counting hundreds of children scattered all about. The management of the strike had set up a public address system run by an electric motor placed not far away. These sessions would go on from about nine thirty to noon time, always giving instructions to the people, and explaining the reason for the strike, and voicing the great injustices the people were suffering at the hands of the Company.

While Fr. Wade had long enjoyed addressing his congregations from the altar, here he listened to a new popular and secular authority. He had to ask others “to allow me to speak by the P.A.

---

9 Testimony of Julio César Rivera, in Barahona, El silencio, 137; for a fuller account of the 1954 strike, see Argüeta, La gran huelga.

10 “Centro América convulsa,” El Día (Tegucigalpa), 15 May 1954, p. 3.

system to the people.”\textsuperscript{12} In this small space outside the local headquarters of a transnational corporation, the workers had become sovereign, if only for a moment.

The workers maintained their minipolity, their community under construction, with some of the same tools that the company and the state used to maintain their fiefdoms, including a bit of surveillance and some strategic public relations. Fr. Wade’s experience of the shift in local relations of authority is indicative of the development of a new and, however brief, popular sovereignty. Antonio Handal, a Palestinian Christian merchant whose store looked out onto the Ramón Rosa Plaza, warned our priest, who was known locally as “Padre José”:

“It is said that they have put you at the top of the list of men who must be eliminated when they take the power of the government into their hands. You are a marked man.” Then I went out into the Plaza, moving about, speaking to those who came near me. After a few moments, a man came up to me and said in a whisper, “Father, a man is following you with a camera trying to get a face view and picture of you. Don’t look directly in his direction.” I looked around and saw the camera, but continued, not turning towards him. After maybe half an hour, I suddenly found myself surrounded by about fifty people, with a few shouting at me, accusing me of being in favor of the Company, and against the rights of the workman.\textsuperscript{13}

Intimated in this story is the idea that the workers wanted a frontal picture of Fr. Wade to identify and repress him. This wariness, whether rooted in actual events or the product of an overactive memory, indexes the disjunction between the priest and his flock, between his unchanged mode of being and the workers’ new subjectivity, between the social relations that

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 2:293.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 2:293.
obtained before the strike and those that were being produced as the workers inserted themselves into history as active subjects.

Testimony, Photographs, and Place

Figure 2. Courtesy of the Rafael Platero Paz Archive.

On May Day 1954, the procession of workers arrived in the American Zone at around 11:30 a.m. Those whose shift had just ended immediately joined the demonstration. As the mass of men proceeded down the Primera Avenida toward the cemetery and then doubled back toward the Ramón Rosa Plaza, women and children closed the doors to their houses to join the procession. According to Agapito Robleda, one of the United Fruit Company’s construction workers, the group of laborers and their families returned from the American Zone to the plaza at around 2
p.m. with 8,000 people. The mood was festive, and from the open pavilion in the center of the plaza, various speakers addressed the group. From the elevated platform, Miguel Toro read the workers’ declaration of a general strike. At this point, the declaration was more like a secular prayer than a social fact. No one knew whether a couple of relatively small strikes by longshoremen and mechanics in Puerto Cortés and engineering and construction workers in El Progreso would develop into a strike by workers in all industries.

Meanwhile, that same day the US government’s Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) launched _La voz de liberación_, Operation SHERWOOD, a propagandistic radio program meant to disorient Guatemalans and to aid the United States in overthrowing President Jacobo Árbenz. The Honduran Left denounced the US effort to destabilize Guatemala as a threat to the country’s sovereignty and the freedom of its people. On May 2, the strikers in El Progreso sent emissaries out into the surrounding plantations to propose that field hands join in withholding their labor. That same day, US and Honduran officials alleged that a military airplane from Guatemala landed without permission in Puerto Cortés, which, according to them, suggested that the banana workers’ strike was really orchestrated from Guatemala City. The Árbenz government responded that it had sent the plane to investigate the possibility of an invasion by Carlos Castillo Armas, the Guatemalan military officer who was the public face of the CIA’s clandestine operation to end democratic governance in Guatemala.

---

15 Robleda Castro, _La verdad_, 81.
In each of the photographs of the 1954 strike, the workers demonstrate their awareness that they are the subjects of this historic event, that they have seized a degree of power, and that it is they who are being photographically documented, acting as if the strike itself was intended as much for the management of the United Fruit Company as it was for the distant spectators that the camera implied. In the photograph of the strikers demonstrating in the streets of El Progreso, the viewer sees that the workers demonstrate significant control over the message that they are sending. They know they are making history, and they acknowledge the role of the camera in documenting their moment as active political subjects.

Three components of this photo overdetermine the resulting message. First, the workers were communicating, through their sheer mass, the strength of a group agent. Second, with text etched on signs that they carried above the crowd, the workers were declaring solidarity with one another and their joint purpose. Finally, the workers had drawn images of themselves as the typical *campeño*—with rolled-up sleeves, strong arms, and a sombrero—cutting an arm off of an octopus, an international icon of imperialism. Thus, while Platero Paz created this picture, the workers themselves left nothing to chance and worked to ensure that others knew what they were fighting for. To the extent they could, these campeños made clear and consistent representations of their purposes.

As the workers watch themselves being photographed as a collective subject, they are clearly aware of their own power in reclaiming this public space, of converting it in this moment from a space for commerce to one for civic debate. They cannot yet know that massive floods are coming, that 40 percent of them will be fired just three months later, that the company will increasingly rely on chemicals and less on unskilled workers, and, finally, that the company will begin to pull back from the risks of production, shifting those risks onto locals while continuing
to reap enormous profits from the sale of the fruit, literally, of their labor. In the moment when they looked into lens of the camera and the photographer clicked the button, the “posing” subjects and the photographer must have had several potential spectators in mind: fellow workers, neighbors and friends in El Progreso, the newspaper reader, the company and its management, and, perhaps, posterity.

This last issue, of the photograph as a document for future generations, raises questions about the historian’s interpretive approach to visual material. Outside the photographic event, the spectator can imagine what it would be like to be a subject of this particular image. Such a viewer can attempt to imaginatively transpose herself into that photographed subject’s horizon. This reflective act does not cancel out the viewer’s own horizon (I’m still here in the comfort of my North American home looking at this decades-old picture). And in transposing herself into the horizon of the photographed striker, the viewer cannot collapse the horizon of the other. The two horizons—that of the spectator and that of the photographed subject—coexist in tension with one another. But it is precisely this aspect of viewing a photograph that can upset present-mindedness.

Photographs of a particular event can enable the historicizing of that event. In looking at a photographic image, the spectator is invited into what Alan Trachtenberg referred to as the “narrative time” of the photographer and her subjects. The retrospective uses of the image are brought to it but do not necessarily inhere in it. Inherent in the image is only the record of an event, a moment when the shutter opened to let the light that was reflected off an object be captured on film. From this physical process, photographs get their denotative force and testimonial authority. That testimonial authority is what draws us into old photos. This is the new

---

18 Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs, 54–55.
kind of consciousness that the photograph provokes; it was what Roland Barthes called an awareness of having-been-there. The photograph, in a word, lends itself to historicism.

In this photograph of the mass of striking workers, the content of the placards refers concretely to the moment that these working people were bringing about and the new political space that they were constructing. A giant poster carried through the streets of El Progreso depicts a life-sized campeño. Shirtless and with sturdy legs firmly supporting him, he has just swung an ax down into a writhing octopus. The caption reads, “THE STRIKE [sic], GIVING IT GOOD to the OCTOPUS of the Tela RRCo.” Thus when this sign was created, the strike had already begun. Furthermore, the sign refers not to the transnational enterprise, but to its local subsidiary, the Tela Railroad Company. This degree of specificity at a time when workers in different regions of the north coast were protesting United Fruit’s other local subsidiary, the Truxillo Railroad Company, and its main competitor, the Standard Fruit Company, indicates that workers in El Progreso made the octopus sign themselves. The other posters are also replete with local references and orthographic innocence—“Long live the Cectional [sic] syndicalist committee of the electrical department, in solidarity [sic] with the other departments, Honduras live free.” “Long live the Union Committee of the Workshop for Tractors and motorcars, Union, Liberty, Justice, Labor.” “Long live the Department of Agriculture.” “Syndicalist Committee of the Engineering Department.” Such local color was not fabricated from afar but produced on the ground in El Progreso. Thus the surface meanings of photos are the meanings of real surfaces and actual moments, giving viewers a sense for the odd but meaningful specificities of particular places and times as living people—workers, merchants, managers, priests, and photographers—inscribed their wills upon those surfaces and in those moments.
“All day instructions were given to workers through the loudspeakers: on their conduct [comportamiento], on the necessity of organizing, and that they register themselves as members of a future union,” recalls Julio César Rivera.¹⁹ In his testimony, Rivera confirms what is abundantly clear from the photographs: the workers and the strike leaders were aware of their own historicity. They knew that they were risking their lives and livelihoods in withholding their labor from the company. But they did so with particular goals in mind—the rights to join a labor union, to be fairly compensated for services rendered, and to be treated as dignified human beings. Yet the strikers’ attention to their own comportamiento was perhaps their greatest political demand. They made the demand by performing it. Through the strike, the workers became aware of the mutability of their own behavior. That is, the strike allowed them to denaturalize the social and cultural codes that they had taken for granted in their everyday lives.

Through the strike, they realized that they could write new codes for how to govern themselves. The strike enabled them to practice living according to their own rules, which they did partly through a sort of self-help guide in which the Comité Central de Huelga issued directives about behavior: do not drink, line up at the collective kitchens, participate in the worker-run field hospitals and police forces, and divvy up the tasks among different committees. They were thus being encouraged to realize themselves and their goals immediately in their own conduct, in their own miniature political community.

The strike leaders understood their role as agents who could deliberately work to dehabituate the laboring masses and to rehabituate them to self-respect. Perhaps this was the most significant threat to the company and the Honduran state, for even as both continued to report that the strike was completely nonviolent and that the workers were conducting themselves with notable self-discipline, they continually sought to discredit the movement. The fact that the workers, and the representatives from among their ranks, recognized that they could reprogram themselves posed a radical challenge to the established order. The strike movement had already changed the behavior of tens of thousands of laborers and was enabling new subjectivities. This was self-help with the potential to cultivate a new collective self.20

The fact that the strike leader is set against the backdrop of the Honduran flag indicates that the workers put forward their demands and made their claims to dignity as Hondurans. The content of this self-presentation bespeaks the possibility of a new citizen and of a future Honduras that might respond to demands from below. The workers are enacting the phrase “we the people.” Capturing the political as a project under construction, the photograph helps to

20 On dehabituation, see Beasley-Murray, Posthegemony, 211.
habituate workers into who they might become, into what they might make of themselves, as workers and as people newly awakened to their own potential.

Note that as the speaker addresses the mass of workers, his colleague watches the photographer. The gaze of this worker demonstrates two important facts. First, he is aware that he is being photographed, and he does not feign to be caught in a candid moment. Second, he communicates to the photographer that he too is being watched. He directly addresses the photographer and the spectator with this visual énoncé: “I am watching you.” This “I” stands with rolled-up shirtsleeves in front of his country’s flag, defying his employer and demanding respect. He is clearly aware of his presence before spectators. In looking directly into the camera, he notifies potential viewers that they are also present before him. Viewers of this image cannot look on with detachment, as if they were omniscient beings observing others unbeknownst to them. In the 1954 strike, workers demonstrated that while they knew that they were being subjected to company and government surveillance, they would also monitor their new and fragile space of social autonomy.

Why did this worker look into the camera as Rafael Platero Paz was taking the picture? Quite apart from the strike as a mass spectacle, this was a momentous occasion. He stood to lose his job if they failed. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of his coworkers gathered to hear from members of the strike committee. The police and soldiers could turn against the unarmed workers at any moment. As this worker watches Platero Paz, he is allowing the strike to be documented. It is as if the speaker addressing the workers is unaware of the camera and as if viewers of the image could silently witness these events as observers but not participants. But the worker who looks into the camera reminds viewers, and especially the photographer himself, that they are participant observers and that they too have some role in determining how these events
unfold. In this way, this worker’s direct gaze into the camera has multiple effects. He asserts his own dignity. He seeks to interpellate spectators into this historic project. With the power of his gaze, he converts Platero Paz (and the viewers of the photographer’s images) into subjects-for-him. And short of these effects, he firmly and nonviolently warns reactionaries that he too is watching. He is a brave man, and he does not reject the camera and the power that it implies.

In photographs like this one, Platero Paz captured the knot of sovereignty at the heart of El Progreso. His photos document exercises in individual and collective self-forging in a neocolonial space, reflecting how people practiced becoming independent in the banana republic.

When Platero Paz took these pictures, the outcome of this leap into the unknown against known power structures was still highly uncertain. When the camera shutter opened, the workers were still in the moment of decision. They knew what they were trying to change—the hunger, the misery of being disrespected by their employer—they knew what they wanted, and they were embodying it—as organized men and women working together in common cause. What they could not know was how the strike would turn out.

Thus these are photographs of the perhaps, the maybe-it-will-turn-out. They are pictures of self-governance. These workers are more materially poor than ever before. Yet they have become spiritually rich in their moment of decision and in their ongoing commitment to reaffirm their decision to strike for better treatment. As this image of a worker looking directly into the lens of the camera reminds us, the workers recognized that photography was not a passive, objective apparatus of documentation; it was, instead, integral to setting up this new space in which the workers practiced a different mode of being, one that responded to their needs and their will.
By May 3, United Fruit’s entire Tela Division was on strike. The workers had paralyzed the movement of trains and were marching on the railroad tracks to El Progreso from the plantations.\(^{21}\) Women began to throw up collective kitchens to feed the thousands of striking workers who had converged upon El Progreso. Three times a day, the workers queued up for food. As Agapito Robleda recalls, “The ‘Negra’ Mélida López stood out in this activity and commanded a squad of women to ensure order and discipline in the kitchen.”\(^{22}\)

Platero Paz’s photograph of an outdoor collective kitchen captures another way that women participated in the strike movement. Two women face the camera, grinding masa for the tortillas. Other women stand near black cast-iron cauldrons, smoke rising from beneath them. Closest to the photographer, a humble middle-aged woman prays with great devotion.

\(^{21}\) “Los huelguistas están aumentando su número en la División de Tela,” La Época (Tegucigalpa), 7 May 1954, cited in Argüeta, La gran huelga, 67.

\(^{22}\) Robleda Castro, La verdad, 82.
The orderly lines of workers tell two stories that recur in all the photos of the 1954 strike. First, they reflect the self-policing that workers engaged in throughout the strike. Second, they reflect the community rules that labor enacted to begin immediately bringing about the social relations that they were demanding. The immanence of this new political order posed a powerful challenge to the fruit companies’ ideological claims that it was they who were bringing progress and order to the unproductive spaces of the Honduran north coast. Likewise, the Honduran political class had long assumed that it was responsible for disciplining what it regarded as the notoriously rowdy, rebellious, and uncultured hordes. But for 69 days, an ethnically and socially diverse group of more than 25,000 workers maintained strict order while demanding that their dignity and rights be respected. Aside from the fact that they withheld their labor, the workers did so without infringing upon the parallel rights of others. That spirit of self-government was
embodied in the lines that workers formed to receive their daily meals from the collective kitchens.

Platero Paz took several pictures of these queues of striking workers. The distinct line of people is a theme that recurs in many of his photos of the strike, from those of the masses who meticulously stayed within the boundaries of the Ramón Rosa Plaza, leaving the street completely unobstructed, to those of workers assembled on the railroad tracks in front of United Fruit’s offices in the American Zone. Julio César Rivera comments on the community kitchens of El Progreso and the orderly lines that workers formed: “The strike was supported by almost all the people [pueblo]. A great number of families, peasants, in the area of El Progreso gave almost everything they had so that the strike would not fail. It was common to see workers lined up at the homes in El Progreso to get something to eat. . . . In any street, wherever you went, you could see the workers waiting for their food.” To form a line is to engage in a social practice with deep institutional roots. This form of conduct is learned in schools, on the job, in the military, and at Mass, in the queue to receive Holy Communion. As workers lined up to get a meal from a community kitchen, they were citing a kind of modern institutional order. The fact that workers formed lines was yet another way that they participated in a modernizing project on the north coast of Honduras.

Beyond the historical facts that it documents, the very composition of Platero Paz’s photograph of the workers lined up waiting for a meal creates an image of solidarity. Those closest to the camera’s vantage point are singularized, rendered knowable by their faces. As I see the Other, who is “there,” right in front of me, I am challenged by his very presence to think about where I am in relation to him. This photograph positions the viewer directly at eye level

---

and in close proximity to a few striking workers, enabling the distance between the beholder and the beheld to be overcome. As the line continues, the distance between the viewer and the workers increases. The men I see up close are individuals, while those who are farther away appear as a collective. Platero Paz’s visual eloquence thus captured both the fundamental ethical question that underlies our encounters with others and the fact that solidarity is created by individuals, each of whom decides to make a difference for a common goal. Before the strike, their United Fruit Company overseers had lined these workers up, and they had also been lined up at church and at school. But now they lined themselves up. In doing so, they exposed, while also inverting, the previously reigning order. From an order that had positioned them as objects that could be acted upon, as people who worked and even thought using a script that was not their own, they moved to create a different social order, one that began by instituting local sovereignty and soon expanded beyond El Progreso in an assertion of national sovereignty that the United Fruit Company and the US government found themselves obligated to recognize.

In lining themselves up, the workers were becoming active human subjects, people who were writing their own rules for interacting with each other. Platero Paz captured this individual and collective act of practicing self-governance, creating the possibility that spectators in other places might someday look into the faces of these workers, consider their countenances of stoic resolve, and wonder whether they too might break time into a before and after the event of their decision, writing new rules for themselves and their community and enacting a new way of being workers and being citizens.

“La milagrosa Virgen de Suyapa está en huelga”
Surrounded by a crowd of newly sovereign subjects in the Ramón Rosa Plaza, Fr. Wade feared for his life. Somebody wielded a camera and maneuvered to get a frontal image of the priest. The resulting photo could be used to identify him. It could be shown to workers and others. They were spectators. He was the unwilling object of their gaze. His authority was being displaced. They had authorized themselves to look at him in new ways.

Fr. Wade’s account of being an unwilling subject in a photographic encounter highlights the political logic that motivated the workers. The striking workers had drawn an internal frontier between themselves (as a laboring class and as Hondurans) and the United Fruit Company and its allies. In the 1954 strike, field and factory workers successfully aligned themselves with key sectors of the middle class against a common enemy. This is the logic of populism. The “empty signifiers,” to invoke Ernesto Laclau, that linked the demands of workers were the idea of “the ordinary Honduran,” the dignity of the obrero, and the inherent but long-denied worth of “Juan Pueblo.”

In light of the strike, it is easy to see that in his presidential campaign of 1954, Ramón Villeda Morales was not so much the author of a populist discourse as the beneficiary of one that had already burst forth from below. Fr. Wade’s account also highlights how the workers drew a frontier between themselves and the official position of the Catholic Church in Honduras, without giving up their deeply felt religiosity.

Collective kitchens and community policing were just two of the ways in which the striking workers pursued a common agenda and asserted a degree of control over how they were represented. In establishing their own working groups, police units, and health clinics, the banana workers temporarily enacted a more egalitarian political community. The striking workers in El Progreso banned the consumption of alcohol, enforcing a standard of public order

---

that was far more severe than the one that typically reigned in the town. They were sober and in control of themselves. In their practices of self-care, in their clear demands, in their modes of organization, and in their steady, intent looks into the camera, the striking workers demonstrated themselves to be anything but a violent and unruly mob.

But that is not what Fr. Wade saw. He shuddered: “They were not sincere friends discussing this with me, wild, and violent, with what I could not interpret other than hatred. Not a single one of them in the group near me was a man whom I had ever seen before on any trip to the Camps. They were all strangers.”

When he was in the Ramón Rosa Plaza, surrounded by dozens of workers, Fr. Wade felt that he was among strangers. Here again the strike produced a radical antagonism—between the company and its workers—that was simultaneously a new condition of visibility. Before the strike, it was difficult to determine who the friend and enemy were. How could one know? What if that person really was a friend? But during the strike, friends and enemies suddenly became identifiable. Not only could a worker now identify the other, even if his other was his own parish priest, he could also identify himself and where he stood in relation to the other. But this heightened visibility brought with it heightened vulnerability. The company could now see exactly who had struck and who the troublemakers were. Once the company regained control of the situation, it would decide who its friends and enemies were.

But with Fr. Wade still in the crowd, pursued by a camera-wielding worker, the laboring classes performed their own sovereignty: “Fear grabbed me, as they were growing louder and more excited. Suddenly the little monarch, dived into the center of them, and spoke with intense and absolute authority, and shouted ‘Leave this man alone, if you do anything to him now, it will

---

hurt our movement.’ Then he turned to me, and ordered me out of the circle. I was shaken, and left them, and the Plaza also. I realized that I was marked for elimination.”

In Fr. Wade’s account, the local leader was a “little monarch.” The workers had successfully, even if temporarily, instituted a new law.

But the fact that the strikers distrusted their priests and perceived them to be allies of the United Fruit Company does not mean that the workers were atheists or even agnostic. Instead, it highlights a gulf between the aspirations and popular religious practices of the laborers and the quite accurately perceived sympathies of their clergymen. Fr. Wade himself reports on the fervent religiosity of the striking workers. After two of their representatives returned from negotiations in Tegucigalpa, “the first thing they [the workers waiting in El Progreso] did was all go to the Church of Mercedes and light a few candles and Thank God for their safe return.”

Beyond the demands that workers were making—for the right to join labor unions, higher wages, and better treatment from their bosses—they were also enacting a new social and juridical order. Again, one of the foundations of that new order was the establishment of a worker-directed disciplinary apparatus. Fr. John Murphy, SJ, commented on the strikers’ local police brigade:

The leaders had the town blockaded. Every road going out of town had a few men with rifles forbidding everyone to leave. None could enter either. . . . I was called to visit a dying man in Santa Rita and I got in my jeep and went to Santa Rita road. At the point leaving town I was stopped and asked why I wanted to leave town. I said for a sick call. They said, “No.” So I had to return.

---

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 2:294.
28 Murphy, interviewed by Wade, ibid.
According to this unsympathetic observer, the workers physically controlled the space, and they did so, in part, with the threat of violence. As the official Catholic Church aligned itself with the United Fruit Company and the United States in continuing to deny workers their basic rights, the workers also ended up challenging the tradition of deferring to clerical authority. By the same token, if Fr. Murphy’s account is true, then it suggests that even as the workers went about founding a new order of equality, they did so by adopting a means of separating and disciplining that was integral to the old order of the state and the corporation.

The skepticism with which the striking workers regarded their priests from the United States is further revealed by the fact that Fr. Murphy was blamed for bringing in the Honduran military. He recounts: “I was accused of sending a message so that the army would send soldiers to free the town from the communists, but I had nothing to do with it.” Nevertheless, the soldiers came. As Fr. Murphy reported, their effect on the strike movement was immediate:

After this plane came four more, five in all parked with soldiers in full battle gear. About three hundred men with rifles and bayonets, hand grenades, pistols, tear gas canisters, and submachine guns and gas masks, were in town. They immediately formed into a front of twenty men in line, one after the other, and marched into town. . . . With this sudden show of military force, like ghosts from a distant planet, the people in awe and fear gathered before the platform near the Company offices, maybe ten thousand of them. The Army did not waste time. They formed their front about fifteen abreast, and marched toward the center of town. . . . When the Captain at their front got within speaking distance by using his “bull-horn” he shouted “all disperse and leave this area. I will come toward
you walking, but after a certain distance I will give the order of double time.”

Their rifles worn their bayonets, glistening in the sun, and the men with full battle gear. . . . The people scrambled to escape, and to run away, down the street, toward the river. . . . In a few hours half of the men had returned to their Camps, happy to get out of Progreso.²⁹

At the behest of the United Fruit Company, the government quickly reestablished control over the town of El Progreso.

Upon arriving, the soldiers’ first order of business was to force the workers to leave the American Zone.³⁰ For about ten days, the factory and field workers had succeeded in greatly increasing what could be seen and said in this neocolonial locality. But the fact that the workers were driven from the American Zone only strengthened their identification with the whole of Honduran society. Even though most of the strikers worked for the United Fruit Company, they were at the bottom of the hierarchy, a fact conspicuously underscored by the architecture of the American Zone itself. Likewise, though most of the strikers were Honduran, they enjoyed few of the rights and protections of citizenship and were clearly not members of the political elite. On May 18, the strike committee demanded, to no avail, that the soldiers be withdrawn.³¹

The military had been used to reverse the strikers’ presence in the American Zone and to restore the previous distribution of what could be said and seen. The earlier forms of exclusion would be strictly enforced, especially in this important region of the city. Certain bodies and particular modes of being were allowed in this space and others were not. The first repressive step that the state and the company took toward restoring the old order involved physically and

²⁹ Murphy, interviewed by Wade, ibid., 2:296–97.
³⁰ Barahona, El silencio, 167.
³¹ Argueta, La gran huelga, 83.
symbolically driving the workers from the heart of El Progreso. Cast out from the American Zone, the workers were the embodiment of the Honduran people. This is perhaps one reason why, three weeks into the strike, the CIA reported that the majority of Hondurans sympathized with the strikers and that the company had “practically no friends.” Here, in the Ramón Rosa Plaza, banana workers, a group that hitherto had no securely defined place in the Honduran imaginary, could stand in for the whole of Honduran society.

The extreme Right sought to brand the strike leaders as communists manipulating the working masses. Such views were aggressively put forward by people like Abraham Williams Calderón, the presidential candidate for the Movimiento Nacional Reformista (MNR), an offshoot of former dictator Tiburcio Carías Andino’s National Party. For the MNR, the popular religiosity of the workers, their self-imposed ban on alcohol, and their claims to patriotism were simply Soviet camouflage or further evidence of their naïveté, which it mocked: “There’s even

---


33 For the logic of how “the part that has no part” comes to stand for the whole, see Žižek, “Lesson,” 70.
Mass in the blessed strike.” At the same time, US Ambassador Whiting Willauer reported that the archbishop of San Pedro Sula, Monsignor Antonio Capdevilla, was “very useful in dividing the strike leaders from the extremist strike leaders, supporting the former with a considerable campaign through the priests accompanying the workers.”

But in contrast to the claims of the hard Right and the official position of the Catholic Church in Honduras, consider Rafael Platero Paz’s photograph of the striking workers participating in an open-air Mass in the Ramón Rosa Plaza. In the image, dozens of men can be seen facing an improvised altar. Wearing white vestments, the Jesuit priest has his back turned to the congregation. The men have removed their hats, out of respect. Looking closely, one can see the deep stains on their work shirts. Some women and children have also come to celebrate the Eucharist. Most everyone within earshot of the priest appears to be reverently praying or paying attention.

The evidentiary function of the photo testifies to an authentically religious crowd. The group of people depicted subordinates itself to the authority of the priest. While respecting the priest and appealing to the divine, the workers had also succeeded in bringing the priest and the sacrament out of the church and into the autonomous space that they had created. The workers made the space holy. Work and civic life, religion and demands to be treated with dignity: the striking workers brought them all together in the Ramón Rosa Plaza. Far from the priests converting the workers, the 1954 strike may have begun the process of conversion for the Jesuits working in Honduras.

Such a reading of this image would help to square the private disdain that the priests

---

34 “Que la Virgen de Suyapa está en la huelga,” Prensa Libre (Tegucigalpa), 2 June 1954, quoted in Barahona, El silencio, 36.
35 Willauer to US Department of State, 5 June 1954, telegram no. 419, quoted in Argueta, La gran huelga, 96.
showed for the strike movement with the way that they publicly tended to the spiritual needs of the workers. For instance, a newspaper correspondent from El Progreso reported with admiration: “The miraculous Virgin of Suyapa is on strike. The workers carried Her image to the Ramón Rosa Plaza, headquarters of the strike, and erected a beautiful altar, which they keep illuminated with a profusion of candles. They sang the Rosary to Her and held an Outdoor Mass, which the priests of our sacred parish church celebrated.”\(^{36}\) In the 1954 strike, workers not only asserted their dignity vis-à-vis the United Fruit Company and the Honduran state, they also refashioned their relation to the Catholic Church. The workers and their families remained fervently Catholic even as they enacted a popular religiosity that reflected their specific worldly needs.

As the striking workers carried a likeness of the Virgin of Suyapa through the streets of El Progreso to the Ramón Rosa Plaza, they reminded themselves, the Honduran state, the United Fruit Company, and the Catholic Church that there was a force mightier than each of them. The most powerful virgin in Honduras was on the side of the workers. In this outdoor setting—abandoned but pleading for protection from the state, the company, and the church—the workers transformed themselves from a heterogeneous group of isolated individuals into a collective agent with specific purposes and distinctive ways of representing itself. In doing so, they reoriented the existing normative order in the three most fundamental realms of power: political, economic, and religious. First, the workers reminded the Honduran government that it had a duty to care for those it governed, especially the factory and field workers of the north coast. Second, the workers insisted that the United Fruit Company had a duty to respect the rights of its employees, skilled and unskilled, women and men. Third, by forcefully asserting their inherent

dignity, the workers and their families reminded the Catholic Church that it had a duty to care for the poor and for working people. But in constructing this new social reality in which dominant entities could be compelled to take up their duties toward their less powerful constituents, the workers needed more than a list of demands. As the newspaper correspondent from El Progreso reported, they summoned the *milagrosa*: “The mothers, the wives, the daughters, the sisters of the workers on strike, every night they pray to the Virgin and they ask her to help them through this painful and delicate trance.”

Rafael Platero Paz was there to convert their prayers to the Virgin into allegorical still images of and for *progreseños*. This open-air Mass could thus be interpreted as a rebellion against the local Father in both his avatars, as the United Fruit Company and as Fr. Joseph Wade. Thus, within a Christian model of subjectivity, the striking workers de-reified both the corporate neoimperial structure of domination and the religious support that undergirded those dependent relations of production. The event of the strike thus sought to uproot the structures that had been built into the core of the workers’ psyches and to rework those basic materials through an emancipatory politics that retrieved and reactivated a popular Catholicism that could serve at once as a source of inner strength while also offering the possibility of transcendental standards of love and justice against which the company, the state, the church, and peasants would have to measure themselves.

But allow me now to propose a literal interpretation of the Honduran newspaper report on the Virgin of Suyapa. “The miraculous Virgin of Suyapa is on strike” would mean that she was not willing to intercede on behalf of the workers. There was no need to. They were already changing their lives on their own. In other words, the 1954 strike also reveals the secularization

\[37\] Ibid.
of self-sculpting. The banana workers in Honduras demonstrated that the strike is labor’s despiritualized High Mass, a set of ascetic practices self-imposed and publicly staged to activate an ethical response from spectators in the company, the state, and in a transnational community of those who might see these pictures.

In each Catholic Mass, the transubstantiation of bread and wine is dramatized, a ritual that encourages the faithful to contemplate their own lives in the context of a story that takes the universal, makes it human and suffering, only to pass again into the eternal and unconditionally loving. The Mass escorts the believer through interior exercises in which the devotee adopts a transcendent, God’s-eye view of herself and considers what it might take to pass from this life into eternal life. This is a mental doubling not unlike the material doubling that photography enables between one’s real self and one’s ideal self. The workers, on strike and praying at the Mass in the Ramón Rosa Plaza, were coaching themselves, shoring up a frame of mind that would give them confidence in the inner acts and private decisions that were the true source of power in the 1954 strike, an outer collective act by which they attempted to secure a better place for themselves in this world.


Many historians add photos to their books. But too often those images are afterthoughts, pictures that are apparently worth far less than a thousand words, almost none of which needs to be spoken. Scholars of Honduras are no different. Mario Argueta, Marvin Barahona, and Agapito Robleda Castro have used photos of the 1954 strike as illustrations, supplements to their
carefully wrought arguments based on written and oral source material. But for all their strengths, explanations of the causes and consequences of the strike most often fail to convey the affective sources of these defining events, much less the reflective acts of people struggling to denaturalize the economic and political norms that perpetuate their deprivation. Instead, even the testimonial literature creates a distance between the leader who is interviewed and the rank and file who remain silent, between the reader and the person giving her testimonio.

In contrast, Platero Paz’s pictures of the striking banana workers, many of whom could not even sign their names on official government documents and instead had to leave their thumbprints (the original digital signature), invite proximity. Photographed faces attest to lived lives, to inner states, to obstacles confronted. A scar is a story, the wrinkles were earned, the knitted brow is an outward sign of inner turmoil. When we combine these photographs with traditional historical source material, we can better explain and feel what was at stake when thousands of workers withheld their labor. Photographs of the strike enable insights and emotions that traditional analysis of social and political developments does not provide: access to experiences that have long since been forgotten and may never have even consciously registered

---

in the minds of the participants in those photographed moments, as well as ways to be touched and to have one’s imagination captivated. But the photographs do not speak for themselves. From the present in which they are seen, photos require the beholder to actively and meaningfully link them to the pasts to which each image testifies.

My reworking of the strike as interior exercises in individual and collective self-government emerged not from the existing historiography on the strike, but from interpreting what had remained unremembered yet was clearly encoded within Platero Paz’s pictures. With his photos in front of me, I began reading traditional sources to track changing conditions of visibility: to see how people altered who could be seen doing what when and where, as well as the ways that private enterprise demarcated itself and restored order by using public security forces. The prayers, the outdoor Masses, and the popular religiosity that animated the workers: these themes are absent from the historical literature on the defining event in twentieth-century Honduras. Platero Paz’s pictures enable us to recover gazes, as well as embodied practices, that would otherwise have been annihilated by the myth of progress in El Progreso. It is our task to interpret these visual artifacts within the context of the material and social structures that conditioned who could do what in early Cold War Honduras. We create these narrative and analytical links while also taking stock of the technical constraints of the camera as a mechanical device, and, crucially, by making judgments about what we can infer regarding the intentions of the photographer and his subjects as they produced and isolated these moments on film.

Photographs of working peoples, moreover, are often created as sites of solidarity and endure as such many decades later, as new generations repurpose the images for the struggles

---

39 For a powerful argument for incorporating affect as a critical lens for understanding photography, see Brown and Phu, “Introduction.”
that they face. Platero Paz’s strike photos bear witness to the lives of people who sought to change how they were treated by a powerful company and their own government. These photos turn us into witnesses, responsible for what we see, of their lives. These photos make visible processes and struggles that the company and the state attempted to keep out of sight, and are thus central to recovering individual and collective memory. Furthermore, as deictic statements, photographs can be debated by anyone at any time. Some photos, unlike book-length arguments, are tight visual allegories that travel easily. Photographs do not require years of specialized training to begin interpreting them. And none of us has the last word on what they mean. Political activists have long known how to recuperate an old image to recharge a community’s potential to act in the present. In the wake of the 2009 coup d’état that dragged President Manuel Zelaya out of the country in his pajamas, a movement to restore constitutional rule suddenly emerged, nourishing itself on memories of the 1954 strike. But this time it was not a sole studio photographer and a handful of photojournalists documenting and extending the moment; now anyone with a camera phone could work to restore the civil contract.

Beyond these historiographical contributions, I have sought to demonstrate how photos can be used to reinvigorate the writing of working-class history. Stepping back from this archive-driven argument, I would like now to risk offering a programmatic statement on how we might think about the photograph as source material for labor history.

---

40 I am attempting to extend Daniel James’s notion of “sites of solidarity”; see James, Doña María’s Story, 148.
41 I consider here some of the unique characteristics of photographic images, bracketing out a discussion of the visual archive as such. For an examination of a few stray images that escaped from an archive of capital and how they prompt a rethinking of the 1928 massacre of banana workers in Colombia, see Coleman “Photos.”
The Subject of Photography

To build from the most self-evident of premises, the photo is not a pure and immediate representation of a subject prior to structure, ideology, or discourse. It is not the subject in itself, an unmediated being, unaffected by historical and place-specific formations of capitalist production and regimes of gender, nationalism, and religion. Rather, adapting philosopher Alain Badiou’s theory of the subject, I maintain that the photo always indexes a subject in her place or in the place that she pretends to be. Hence if a given photo happens to index a subject in itself, it is always also marking the split between the subject-in-becoming and the society, norms, ideals, and material culture in which that subject finds herself. That is, the photograph registers not only a depicted person but also the place in which that person finds herself. In some rare photographs, the force of the subject may overwhelm the structures acting upon her. In such images, the subject creates herself and her place in the world as something positively new. But in most photos in which people are depicted, what registers is either the placing of the subject or the
subject placing herself in a specific scene.\textsuperscript{42}

The photo and the subject it depicts are, moreover, known from a particular standpoint. To reckon with how and what we can know through the photograph, I draw on Ariella Azoulay’s recent work to assert that photography mediates relations between people such that no single participant in a photographic encounter—neither photographer, nor sitter, nor viewer—has sovereign authority over how the resulting image will be used and interpreted. Azoulay’s notions of “the civil contract of photography” and “the event of photography” can help us to extricate ourselves from what Latin American studies scholar Gareth Williams has called “the active implementation of center-periphery thinking,” in which the subaltern becomes difference itself, located in a periphery to be accessed, and the intellectual becomes self-transparent, accessing the subaltern from the center.\textsuperscript{43} The special characteristics of photography, and of the encounters that it enables, can shift this debate and level the playing field in ways that even testimonial literature cannot.

Azoulay argues that everyone who engages with photographs—producing, posing, storing, and looking at them—is a citizen in what she calls “the citizenry of photography.” The citizenry of photography is not governed by a sovereign or limited by territoriality; it includes anyone who addresses others through images or who takes the position of a photo’s addressee.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, by entering into what Azoulay calls “the event of photography,” anyone can attempt to reconstruct the broader situation within which marks were made on photographic paper, analyzing what happened within the frame and what may have been going on outside of the frame. But the mere presence of visual traces of subaltern agency does not guarantee that

\textsuperscript{43} Azoulay, \textit{Civil Contract}; Azoulay, \textit{Civil Imagination}; Williams, \textit{Other Side}, 86.
\textsuperscript{44} Azoulay, \textit{Civil Imagination}, 13.
they will be recognized as such. As we look at the photograph that Platero Paz took of the mass of workers marching in El Progreso, we have to think outside of the photographic frame and draw upon textual and oral sources to reconstruct the moment that led to this photographic event. In doing so, we are exercising what Azoulay calls “civil imagination,” reversing the image to think back to the moment when the picture was taken and to the conditions that enabled the 69-day appearance of this plural and popular sovereign.

For thinking both within and outside of the photographic frame, I employ philosopher Jacques Rancière’s notion of “the distribution of the sensible,” which provides a broad framework for analyzing the underlying historically constructed facts of sense perception that effectively limit what can be seen, said, and done in particular social arrangements. The distribution of the sensible is the set of historically sedimented preconditions that govern what counts as speech in a specific situation as well as when and where certain kinds of people can be seen and heard. A given distribution of the sensible is disrupted, according to Rancière, when members of a community that has been excluded come forward and point to their exclusion. In this regard, anyone at any time can disrupt an arrangement of positions and sensibilities. Thus part of what I attempt to do in a broader study of the politics of images in El Progreso is to explain how the presence of the United Fruit Company and the hierarchy that it imposed between plantation workers, overseers, engineers, and general managers came to seem appropriate and even natural. By denouncing a wrong, the workers disrupted this distribution of places. The denunciation of low wages in the general strike of 1954 produced a dispute in which those who had been excluded from political, economic, and cultural decisions voiced a demand that presupposed a fundamental relation of equality with their putative superiors.

---

Bridging the theoretical space between Azoulay and Rancière, I conceptualize photography as a technical means of enacting new ways of seeing, thinking, and doing that are never fully controlled by the operator of the camera, the subject of the picture, or the viewer of the image. But whereas both Rancière and Azoulay focus on the social power of photographs and the ethics of spectators who encounter these images, I attempt to keep the subject before the camera in tight focus. My emphasis on the role of the subject of the photograph is, in large part, an accident of circumstance. As I conducted research into the politics of images in El Progreso, I never gave up searching for ways that photographs circulated and for the ways that people received and consumed these image objects. But what I found instead were splendid private archives and frustratingly few venues for the mass circulation of photos in early twentieth-century Central America. Circumscribed by what I could infer about the reception and distribution of images in neocolonial Honduras, I came to focus more on the subjects of the pictures. Photos can help us to understand the naturalization and production of economic impoverishment. But they can also beckon us to pause to contemplate the lives and loves of others. Platero Paz’s photographs of the 1954 strike captured and extended a moment when workers changed what could be seen, said, and done in their banana company town.

In posing for a photo, the subject makes choices about who they are and who they want others to believe they are. Photography allows individuals to make subtle attacks on existing psychosocial conditions and on the existing allocation of privilege. Some photos are thus nano-assertions through which the photographic subject stages, practices, and embodies a new way of being. Thus I think of photography as a specific kind of trace-making mediation that produces self-awareness in the sitting subject.
In a word, I have come to think of a broad range of photographic genres—from disciplinary to documentary to studio—as social practices of self-forging. My notion of these photographic practices as purposive, repeatable exercises that slow down the act of looking and the interior reflection on the fact that one is being looked at is capacious enough to allow for photography to be understood both as a means of surveillance, discipline, and classification and as a tool for self-sculpting. What photography as surveillance and photography as self-presentation have in common is that both are modes of practice that are consciously undertaken and gradually improved upon.

And while I have focused in this article on photographs of workers producing themselves rather than a product (the banana crop is literally cropped out of Platero Paz’s pictures), the visual archive is particularly well suited for tracking the maintenance and reinvention of the entire commodity chain. That is, if writing the history of working peoples involves tracing the process by which private and public enterprises gather resources and transform them into products and services, then photography often functions both to reinscribe this sequential chain and to disrupt it in the ways that we have examined here. Visual media are, on the one hand, an integral part of a connective loop that produces the worker as a social type (e.g., Juan Valdez farming Colombian coffee beans), the consumption of the image of the worker and his geographic and cultural space, and, eventually, the branded product of labor. By capturing the worker in his or her place of work and then slapping a caption onto that image to clearly state the intended ontological determination, the production of the photograph and the production of the worker as such come off as coexistent. As photohistorian Will Fysh says, “producing the photo
produces the worker producing the labor-product.”

In this loop, the image of labor production is itself a product that produces us, the spectators, as consumers. On the other hand, consumer culture is often driven by commodity fetishism, which effectively erases the labor that went into production to turn the product into a fetish object. The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat and Miss Chiquita, for example, invited us to consume the tropics by identifying the image with the product itself, which was emptied of the meaning of its production as labor in a marketing campaign that made working conditions invisible to the consumer. The rhetoric of photography is equally efficient in homogenizing labor into an ideal type whose qualities—manliness, earthiness, and “Latin sensuality”—attach to the product and, from the other direction, in evacuating any traces of the worker in utterly abject conditions producing the object to be desired. In both cases, photography serves to regenerate the commodity chain as a loop between production and consumption. And as Barthes pointed out more than 50 years ago, it is precisely the photo’s indexicality, or the illusion of indexicality, that naturalizes this process, assuring us that this is not merely visual rhetoric but something in the world that the camera recorded.

Yet, as I have shown here, photography can also short-circuit the transition between production and consumption, disrupting the economy of consumerism and instituting in its place a sphere of participation. As the banana workers in El Progreso merged otherwise discrete realms—social, economic, political, and religious—and as they worked to denaturalize the codes that had kept them in their place, they interrupted what was otherwise a conveyor belt from Honduran soil to kitchen tables in North America. So while the United Fruit Company Photograph Collection at Harvard University is an archive of banana production, Platero Paz’s

[46] Will Fysh (PhD candidate in History, University of Toronto), in discussion with the author, Jan. 2015; I am grateful to Will for helping me to clarify my thoughts on the value of photography for rethinking labor history.
archive substitutes that labor with the labor of self-forging. Thus photography makes visible both the naturalized codes of labor production and the defamiliarizing of those codes through poetic self-making. Put differently, the “unconscious optics” of the camera reveal both the Taylorization of the workplace and the rationalization of the working body, as well as the hidden details and parallel stories of laborers producing themselves as citizens and self-emancipating subjects.47

Photographic archives, which remain virtually untouched by historians of Latin America, offer source material that invites a rethinking not only of how working people were disciplined by business enterprises and nation-states, but also how they represented themselves and their aspirations. As these visual archives are engaged, historians of Latin America will invent new conceptual tools for accessing and understanding the self-aware presence of labor in the shaping of historical events, especially those that have been covered over as workers were so often outmatched by capital and the state.

References


Azoulay, Ariella. 2012. Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography. Translated by

47 On the “unconscious optics” of the camera, see Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 237.


Kevin Coleman is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *A Camera in the Garden of Eden: The Self-Forging of the Banana Republic* (University of Texas Press, forthcoming). His work has been supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation / American Council of Learned Societies.