

# The Irritating Success Of Costa Rica

## Guatemalans resent their successful neighbors.

by Juan Luis Font

translation and commentary by  
Raymond McClaren

**A**re you one of the Guatemalans who crossed their fingers last Friday so that the Costa Rican national team did not tie Germany? [At the World Cup, Guatemala had a strong start against the powerful German team and looked as though it might manage a tie, but eventually lost 4-2.] Perhaps you are one of those who suffer a sharp pain when you open a travel magazine and you note the ranking of that neighbor of ours as one of the world's preferred tourist destinations.



Costa Rican national park.

At best you may have noted how irritating it is for that country to be considered fit for investments of the caliber of Intel, manufacturer of computer components, and that its coffee is recognized as one of the best and most competitive on the world market.

The success of Costa Rica makes us feel uncomfortable and her continuous accomplishments disconcert us (and the envy, that too). Confronted with the question, many Guatemalans, to justify their extreme hostility toward that country, allude to the presumed arrogance of the Costa Ricans, always disposed to

make themselves different from their neighbors. However, it is certain that the explanation for such distaste goes deeper.

In the second half of the 20th century, a succession of Social Democratic and Christian Democratic governments, whose parties have now turned more liberal, have achieved a great deal while the rest of the nations of Central America, except Panama, continue in utter ruin to this day.

From the triumphant revolution of 1948 with Jose Figueres as leader, Costa Rica has constructed a viable country. Her institutions function, indeed her judicial system, imperfect as any other, is capable of handling such difficult undertakings as

bringing to justice two former presidents for taking money from foreign governments and favoring enterprises that do business with the government in exchange for gifts.

There is no chronic hunger there to the degree that we are familiar with in the rest of Central America, nor are there serious abuses in the matter of human rights. The Costa Rican Forces of Public Safety do not kidnap anybody, and the government does not dismantle then reassemble itself every four years to reap the electoral harvest.

Almost a fifth part of her territory (this includes her major natural treasures and her most beautiful beaches) form part of the national park system instead of having been converted into exclusive, restricted suburban housing areas for the elite.

Although the argument between those who support liberalizing the economy more or less is the issue of the day there, the successful State Bank and the increasingly less competitive National Electricity and Telephone Company co-exist. Nevertheless, Costa Rica does not pay her weight in gold for electricity to some favored entrepreneur who has managed to rob the government, nor does she depend on petroleum to generate electricity. Hydroelectric plants pro-


duce a little more than 90 percent of the energy that the Ticos [Costa Ricans] consume.

It certainly would be helpful for us to study in comparative terms what has produced such a prodigy in that nearby country, one very similar to ours. It



Guatemalan police in action

would be good to study, without recourse to cheap racialistic arguments, why a nation with much less territory and natural resources achieves greater harmony and resounding successes at a global level.

Did you feel envious when you heard the national anthem of Costa Rica played in Munich? Look into your own feelings. Investigate them, finally reflect. 

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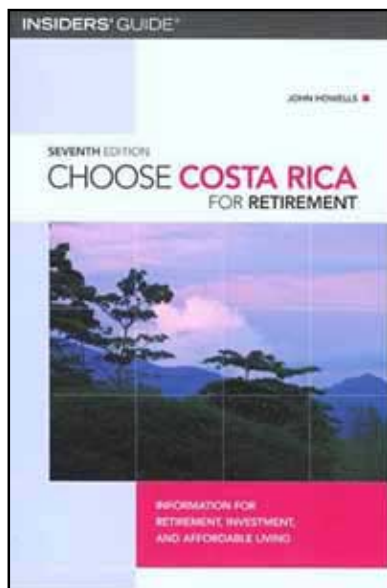
**R**ace "is the key of history," wrote Benjamin Disraeli famously, and there is no more telling proof than the juxtaposition of the largely-white nations of the Americas and their Mestizo neighbors. The successes of the United States, Canada, Costa Rica, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay are in sharp contrast with the rest.

Brazil is a universe of its own, and would require a separate study of its population that is 54 percent white and 39 percent mulatto. The 101 million Brazilians of European origin will nevertheless be valuable allies in the racial struggle. Brazil's government, unlike the one in Washington, does not embrace Negritude, which means the country is

not given to suicidal fantasies.

Haiti is not worth mentioning in an analysis of the Americas, since it is really the westernmost part of Africa. Cuba is a smaller version of Brazil, but with the proportions reversed: a 37 percent European and 51 percent mulatto mosaic.

The white proportions of the advanced European nations of Latin America range from 88 percent for Uruguay to 96 percent for Chile and Argentina. In Costa Rica, whites are about 94



percent of the population (though this figure includes a certain number of lighter Mestizos). Richard Lynn, in *IQ and the Wealth of Nations* reports that the average Costa Rican IQ is in the low 90s while Guatemala scores a resoundingly low 79. Guatemala is therefore not a candidate for the modern era. It would be harsh but fair to say that Costa Rica is an intelligent nation and Guatemala a stupid one.

Egalitarian voodoo artists always ignore racial percentages when they talk about the disparities in the Hemisphere. Mr. Font is an exception because he does mention it, if only to dismiss it. He is a courageous reporter who lives under constant death threats for his work in uncovering and reporting on the clandestine military cemeteries of the Guatemalan Civil War of 1960-1996 but he pales before the subject of race. What choice does he have in a Mestizo republic?

Mr. Font is a Guatemalan, albeit a very intelligent one, and a very fine expository writer. He is a good man who wants his nation to advance, but he must

sidestep the uncomfortable truth about race. To give him credit, he does not try to claim the Costa Ricans are underhanded, criminals, or just plain lucky, as Mexicans do when they compare themselves to the United States.

In fact, there is almost a dream-like quality to Costa Rica compared to the eco-disasters elsewhere in Latin America. It is the only manicured nation in the Americas, so devoted is it to its environment.

It is a popular retirement destination for Americans, and even worth a trip for expert, inexpensive dental work—many of its dentists trained in the United States. Reasonably-priced all-inclusive medical insurance is also available, and mandatory for the foreigners who come to retire.

Not everything is wonderful in Costa Rica. It has Nicaragua for a neighbor, and the immigration problem spiked in the years after the Sandinistas destroyed the national economy. Right now, there are about 340,000 Nicaraguan poachers and squatters in the country—eight percent of the population—so Costa Rica has her very own Mexico, though it is north of the border. The Costa Rican government has remained firm on immigration control, which has rechanneled Nicaraguans to other countries, notably El Salvador, where they do the jobs Salvadorans do not do because they are not there because they have gone to the United States.

Returning to Mr. Font, he is addressing himself to *resentidos*, or Guatemalans who resent Costa Rica the way Mexicans resent the United States. Resentment is so widespread in the Mestizo regions of Latin America that it is probably genetic in origin, a permanent animus that would exist even if the US or Costa Rica did not. Mr. Font notes that the envy, hostility, and distaste his countrymen feel is so deep, they blame it on “the presumed arrogance” of the Ticos, not their accomplishments.

Mr. Font concludes by calling for a study of “such a prodigy in that nearby country, one very similar to ours” but




Guatemala street scene.

one “without recourse of cheap racial arguments.” Presumably this will clear up the mystery of why Guatemala is a corral and Costa Rica a castle, but he rules out the only real explanation. If Mr. Font were to rid himself of his mental block about race, he would have two options: He could write the truth and receive even more death threats, or he could emigrate to Costa Rica, which would welcome him—or both.

The great British architect Christopher Wren’s epitaph is *Si monumentum requies circumspice* (If you seek his monument, look around). One could write a variant that explains the great divide between European America and Mestizo America: *Si monumenta gentium requiris circumspice*, which means,



More Guatemalan security forces.

if you seek the accomplishments of the peoples, look around—or better—open your eyes. 

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# The Black-Jewish Alliance

Cheryl Greenberg, *Troubling the Waters: Black-Jewish Relations in the American Century*, Princeton University Press, 2006, 351 pp., \$29.95.

## Why it arose and why it fell apart.

reviewed by Thomas Jackson

It is well known that Jews and Jewish organizations strongly supported blacks in their efforts to dismantle discriminatory laws and practices. It is equally well known that the black-Jewish coalition foundered in the 1960s. Cheryl Greenberg, professor of history at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, has used extensive access to the archives of many organizations to write a history of this relationship with an emphasis on trying to understand the motives, both for the alliance and its breakup. Like virtually all such studies, *Troubling the Waters* is aggressively liberal, nostalgic for the days when Jews and blacks marched shoulder to shoulder.

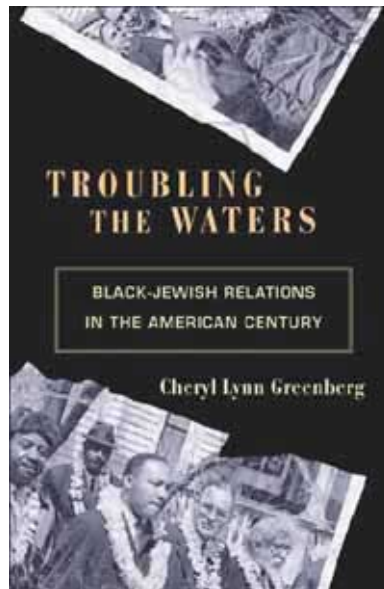
As Prof. Greenberg notes, there was no talk of a special relationship between blacks and Jews until the early decades of the 20th century. The small number of Jews living in the colonies and in the 19th-century United States had essentially no influence on public policy, and Jews in the antebellum South owned slaves at a slightly higher rate than gentiles. It was not until the arrival of some two million Jews during the waves of immigration that began in 1880 or so and the northern trek of large numbers of blacks during the Great Migration that the two groups began to discover common interests.

Blacks were outsiders, but many Jewish immigrants were, too. German Jews who had been in the United States longer, worried that newly-arrived Eastern European Jews gave them a bad name. In 1901, Rabbi Abram Isaacs described the established Jew's view of the newcomer: "ignorant, superstitious, bigoted hypocritical, cunning, ungrateful, quarrelsome, unclean, and in many other ways abominable." German Jews hoped for "more polish and less Polish."

Jews, like blacks, faced discrimination. Many restrictive covenants excluded Jews along with non-whites, some employers would not hire Jews,

and the Ivy League started restricting Jewish enrollment before the First World War.

Jews quickly established ethnic organizations. B'nai B'rith (Hebrew for 'Sons of the Covenant') had been in existence since 1843, and set up its activist wing, the Anti-Defamation League, in 1913. The National Council of Jewish Women was established in 1893, and



30 years later there were so many Jewish women's groups they needed an umbrella organization: the Conference Group of National Jewish Women's Organizations. Two of the most important Jewish groups were also established early in the century: the American Jew-

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**Martin Himmelfarb wrote about "that Jewish particularism which likes to regard itself as universalism."**

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ish Committee (1906) and the more activist American Jewish Congress (1916).

Why did these groups gradually ally themselves with blacks? Prof. Greenberg accepts the view that Jews were less inclined than gentiles to be "racist." Many of the new immigrants, she writes, "never felt fully comfortable with a white identity because they rejected the ideol-

ogy of racial superiority that usually accompanied an explicit self-definition of whiteness, because they resisted identifying with those who despised and persecuted them in Europe, and because many Jews continued to insist they were a people (even a race) apart."

Julius Rosenwald (1862 – 1932), part-owner of Sears Roebuck and a substantial donor to black causes, probably made the public case for the alliance as well as anyone: "Whether it is because I belong to a people who have known centuries of persecution, or whether it is because naturally I am inclined to sympathize with the oppressed, I have always felt keenly for the colored races."

Others traced the concern for blacks to Jewish morality and universalist values, but Prof. Greenberg points out that protecting blacks benefited Jews: "It allowed them to fight anti-Semitism by indirection; if racism could be eradicated, discrimination against Jews would also cease." When Jews claimed to be fighting for the liberation of all men, she writes, it was "a sincere, if partial, claim of universalism that masked self-interest." Martin Himmelfarb, who coined the expression "Jews earn like Episcopalians, and vote like Puerto Ricans," called it "that Jewish particularism which likes to regard itself as universalism." There was unquestionably a strong element of self-interest in Jewish advocacy of black causes, which became evident in the 1960s when black and Jewish interests diverged.

Whatever the motives, when the NAACP was founded in 1909, there was considerable—though not dominant—support from Jewish groups, and many of its earliest advisors were prominent Jews: Franz Boas, Felix Frankfurter, Jacob Schiff, Herbert Lehman, Julius Rosenwald. The National Urban League, the other major black organization that survives to this day, was founded one year later, also with some Jewish help.

Prof. Greenberg reports that it was the Jewish women's organizations that first adopted black causes, specifically demands for anti-lynching laws, voting rights, and abolition of the poll tax. However, cooperation was sporadic and restricted mainly to elite opinion. During