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Space in the Tropics: From Convicts to Rockets in French
Guiana (review)

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cia Bayer Richard and John Booth in turn illuminate the contradictory role civil society has played in Central America's ongoing democratic transition. They highlight civil society's "darker side" by showing how certain forms of communal activism apparently stymied the democratization process. Armony's concluding essay compares the region's democratic transition with similar processes in South America and Europe. His article provides a stimulating conceptual map for future comparative analysis.

This ambitious book stands out for its consideration of distinct paths to democratic rule and for its focus on actors generally not associated with such transitions. The editors of course recognize that more research is needed: Given Central America's extremely violent past, the role historical memory has played in complicating transitions to democracy in the region seems especially pressing. With its emphasis on processes rather than outcomes alone, this book makes an important contribution to the study of democratic change in a region long marked by authoritarianism. Clearly organized and highly readable, it should appeal to an especially wide audience.

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Space in the Tropics: From Convicts to Rockets in French Guiana. By Peter Redfield. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. pp. xxii, 345. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$55.00 cloth; \$22.50 paper.

"Does it really matter where things happen? Or more precisely, what might it reveal that different things happen in the same place?" (p. xiv). *Space in the Tropics* takes its reader on a series of journeys as it seeks to answer, or at least delineate a language for answering, such questions. As suggested by its title, this is a book about paradoxes and wonderment. It is at once a history of French Guiana since colonial times—a county at "the margin of the margin" (p. 46)—and a meditation on what the "tropics" have meant in relationship to the metropolis over time. This small, "overseas department" of France has in fact served several distinctive purposes in the Western imaginary as well as French administration: first as the site for Daniel Defoe's classic tropical adventure, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), later as the location for the infamous "Devil's Island" (where Alfred Dreyfus was imprisoned for over four years), and most recently as the launching pad for Europe's highly advanced Ariane satellite rocket system (spearheaded by France). Although Redfield is an anthropologist, this is more an ethnography of gesture, metaphor, and setting than it is of a people *per se*. (You will find few "informants" in this book.) But if his approach is post-modern, Redfield emerges as a master storyteller all the same; he marvels at the palimpsest quality of French Guiana and delights in bringing to us through a variety of literary and methodological devices a closer understanding of the layering and disjuncture that defines modernity here at the margins.

Redfield opens with a brief, self-reflective discussion of anthropology as a "tropical discipline" (p. 15) which defies rigid categorization, just like French Guiana.

This leads the way into an analysis of *Robinson Crusoe*, which Redfield views as a foundational text for later Western imaginings about the tropics. Defoe's tale, in fact, serves as a metaphor for Redfield's larger ponderings concerning the relationship between nature and technology, the local and the global, and of space itself. From here, the book advances chronologically and thematically into the modern period. Failing to transform the colony into a productive agricultural rival to British Guiana (Guyana) just to the north, colonial administrators chose the location to become France's answer to Australia. Redfield's discussion of "the use of geography as punishment" (p. 91) and of the physical and metaphorical place which came to be known as "Devil's Island" is fascinating, if at times his literary flourish is excessive. ("The frame before us wavers slightly: unlike the clear view from the center, the edge remains dim; unlike the consistent blueprint of the Panopticon, the penal colony blurs within its own form" [p. 75].) In the third section of the book, Redfield takes us into the post-colonial (and post-prison) period when French Guiana—now a semi-autonomous, "overseas territory" of France—becomes the location for Europe's response to Cape Canaveral. Here, the central paradox of the tropics is revealed for it turns out that the ideal place to launch rockets into space is at the equator; French Guiana is perfectly poised. Redfield explores the rich ironies involved in the resultant uneven transformation experienced by French Guiana as the territory acquires new global significance. In the end, the Guiana Space Center inhabits a neo-colonial space that is ultra-modern; for some, this means a new cosmopolitan sensibility rooted in access to consumer goods. Ultimately, French Guiana, like the rest of the "underdeveloped world," is imprisoned by metaphors of nature imposed from without over the course of its long colonial history. "'What do we get?' [one man] asked rhetorically. 'Color TV, but they still think we're savages'" (p. 236).

This is a bold and stimulating book that covers enormous ground, and should find its rightful place within the growing literature on global histories. Redfield's prose is fluid and evocative, and often a true pleasure to read. As anthropology, there are very few actual people (living, at least) brought into the picture here. Indeed, one of the frustrating aspects of this book is that the "natives" rarely speak. What is absent is French Guiana's perceptions of its own paradox of modernity and a closer understanding of how local political struggle has acted in response to this positionality. Although we get this at times, it is generally second-hand responses culled from newspaper and television sources. Mostly, this is a book about Redfield's own meditations and perceptions of that problematic laid out in a language and structure that is both accessible and highly engaging.

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