

FROM RED PROFESSOR TO PROVOST: *An Interview with John Coatsworth*

John H. Coatsworth (b. 1941) is author or editor of nine books and scores of articles that cross the disciplines of history, economics, politics, and foreign affairs, in both Spanish and English.¹ After completing doctoral work in history during the 1960s at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, his early publications in the “new economic history” of Mexico transformed the field through a rigorous blending of quantitative, Marxist, and social science research methods, at first focused on the economic and social impact of railroads on Porfirian development and state-building.

*Coatsworth’s 1980s survey, *Central America and the United States: The Clients and the Colossus* (1994) is a classic of international history, and he has contributed broadly to studies of peasant rebellions in Mexico, Latin America’s historical living standards, and Latin America in the global economy. As a dedicated teacher and incisive mentor, Coatsworth’s support has proven critical to scores of aspiring Latin Americanists, including many Mexican scholars. His scholarship, service to the field, and lifelong human rights activism have won him many fellowships and recognitions, including a Guggenheim in 1986 and membership in both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Council on Foreign Relations.*

Coatsworth’s broader influence has been transformative in History, Latin American Studies, and International Relations programs at three major American universities: University of Chicago (1969–92), Harvard University (1992–2007), and Columbia University (2007–22). His organizational prowess as dean of Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) led to his selection as the university’s thirty-ninth provost (2011–19). Until recently, he has continued as the John Mitchell Mason Professor, co-teaching a seminar on US-Latin American Relations with former Mexican Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Castañeda. Coatsworth lives in New York City with his wife of nearly 60 years, Pat Coatsworth; nearby are their daughter Anna and two grandchildren.

1. This interview was conducted by Paul Gootenberg, SUNY Distinguished Professor of History & Sociology at Stony Brook University, and Eric Zolov, Professor of History at Stony Brook University, on December 12, 2023, in New York City. Our appreciation to Stony Brook graduate student Nicholas Allen, for his meticulous transcription.

Eric Zolov: Perhaps you could begin by telling us how your upbringing might have guided you to an interest in Latin America.

John Coatsworth: My upbringing was a little unusual. My mother was bipolar and my father abandoned us. We grew up in welfare apartments where there wasn't anything Latin American or even particularly encouraging. It was an unstable environment, but I did well in school and that counted for a lot. My interest in Latin America began when I was accepted as a member of a group of 59 U.S. students who went to Cuba in the summer of 1963. That's what got my interest in Latin America—the Cuban revolution, Che Guevara, and all of the turmoil of the 1960s.

EZ: Did you have any political consciousness before that moment?

JC: I must have had some consciousness. In high school, I was a very strong supporter of Adlai Stevenson, and somewhere or other, I don't recall where, I became connected to issues that threw me into the Democratic Party and liberalism. When I was ten or eleven, the Columbus [Ohio] newspaper would publish a map of Korea and tell us how many inches the front line was moving. It became an everyday occurrence where you checked to see how well your team was doing.

Paul Gootenberg: Did you grow up in Columbus?

JC: I actually started out on the West Coast, in Long Beach and San Diego. That's where my brother was born. From there, we moved to Columbus where my mother had relatives. I lived in Columbus until something like the sixth or seventh grade, still with no interest in Latin America and paying very little attention to the Cold War. It must have been something about American politics that shook my interest.

EZ: What drew you to Wesleyan as a place to go to college?

JC: My great-grandfather was a Methodist preacher, and in 1832 he became Wesleyan's first professor of Latin and Greek. According to family legend, they went after him because he was too much of an activist. He opened a station in the Underground Railroad in the basement of his pastor's house.

PG: So, you were a Wesleyan legacy of sorts—a legacy in the American Underground Railroad.

JC: Yes, that's right! It was interesting: to go from an unstable welfare-dependent family to being held in some esteem, or at least held in more esteem than I probably was by people who knew of my background.

EZ: Was it an elitist institution at the time? Did you fit in?

JC: I must have fit in fairly well. I don't remember being miserable, anyway. Wesleyan at that time was a men's college of 800 truly annoyed and unhappy young men who wanted to be anywhere else but a Connecticut River mill town with no girls. Wesleyan was the smallest of the Little Three [Amherst, Wesleyan, Williams]. I think it won one football game, against the Coast Guard, while I was an undergraduate. What was most important for me at Wesleyan was that it had a really good history department, and did not discriminate against radicals and people who were discovering that the Cold War wasn't a good idea. It was a wonderful experience in the end. And it's what made me more critical of the Cold War than I might otherwise have been.

EZ: Did you go to Wesleyan with a certain set of political values and then come out with another? Or did you already have a certain kind of critical framework when you arrived?

JC: The latter. At least what I remember is not having to argue much with people. Most of my contacts there were with people who honored Wesleyan's social activism, people we would call liberals today.

EZ: You went to Cuba in 1963. Was the Cuban Revolution already on your radar earlier in college?

JC: It sure was. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, a bunch of us from Wesleyan climbed into a couple of cars—belonging to the more prosperous fellow students—and we headed to western Massachusetts and went campaigning door-to-door for a third-party candidate in the senatorial election that fall. It was a Harvard historian whose name I now can't remember. By that time, when I was a sophomore, I was pretty well into opposing the war. It's fun reading my FBI files—they're pretty accurate!

PG: Does your FBI file go as far back as your time in college? Is that because of the trip to Cuba?

JC: That's right. I don't think anybody in Washington or the FBI would have paid much attention to me if it hadn't been for the connection to a Soviet satellite.

PG: The story I've heard is that you met your wife Pat in Cuba. But I understand the story was more complicated than that.

JC: It was more complicated. The group that was going to Cuba was divided in half. Half went to the Netherlands and then from there to Paris [a necessary journey to evade the U.S. travel embargo]. The other half went to London, changed planes, and also went on to Paris. Pat and I were chatting while we waited in airports, for hours at a time. Pat was quite charming. She later confessed that she thought I was an FBI agent because I didn't have a beard or wear earrings or blue jeans. I dressed like an American college student of some means.

PG: You wore a suit and tie?

JC: I certainly had shoes and a suit.

PG: I remember Pat once saying that a number of people thought you were an FBI informant. It turned out that the informant was the guy with a beard and jeans.

JC: That's right. Of the 59 students, a dozen were FBI informants, and most of them wore jeans and had beards. Part of my political education was getting to know these folks. And it was fascinating to watch what the FBI's impression of all this was. It's curious, but most of the entries in my FBI file are agents calling with new contact information about the people they had been following. It turns out that was because they were under orders to help the FBI determine which of the students at American colleges and universities were so pro-Soviet, or so anti-American, that, in the case of a national security emergency, they would all have to be incarcerated in these concentration camps that had already been built in the Southwest. The list they put together was called the Student Index. And not for the last time, Pat turned out to have much more radical credentials than I. She was listed in the Student Index, and she would have been arrested had the Soviet Union landed troops in . . . I don't know. . . Idaho. But not me.

PG: I seem to recall that Pat was a "red diaper baby," right? Weren't her parents in the [Communist] Party or close to the Party?

JC: That's not quite right. They belonged to a Ukrainian American organization that was part of the Socialist Party before World War I and then left the Socialist Party and affiliated with the CP after the war was over. Her parents probably have long FBI files as well, but Pat's file was mostly devoted to Cuba. Hers was one of

the very few of the names and addresses of people from her ethnic association that went into those files.

PG: And you met Fidel Castro on the trip.

JC: I did. We were supposed to arrive in Paris on a Czech airline, and from there, we were going to take a Cubana plane to Havana. The problem was that the Cubana plane wasn't available at the moment—it was having its Rolls-Royce engines overhauled in Britain. We had to stay three days in Czechoslovakia, where they put us up in this wonderful palace with a goofy, mysterious ambiance, full of Czech bureaucrats. The second secretary of the American Embassy in Prague managed to find out that we were there. He got himself down to the airport and spent a whole afternoon trying to talk us out of going to Cuba. Meanwhile, Pat still thought I was an FBI agent, but that didn't prevent her from asking me to carry her luggage to the next flight.

When we got to Havana, and they put us up at the Hotel Riviera, which is an old Mafia hotel. They thought we had earned a rest, so the next morning they trundled us onto a couple of buses and took us to a resort. And while we were there in the water, or lying around on the beach, Fidel Castro drove up in his jeep with a soldier and his personal physician. He hopped out of the jeep and came out onto the veranda of the hotel. He professed a deep interest in ping-pong—which our guys let him win. That was our entire interaction with Fidel Castro, except for the 26th of July [revolutionary commemoration festivities], when we were in the audience.

EZ: Did you cut cane while you were there? What did you do on the island?

JC: There was no harvest going on at that point, but it was the period of sugarcane growth where you had to hoe between the rows. Otherwise, the weeds would get so large that they would choke off the cane. I kept insisting that I wanted to cut cane, or do whatever, but days passed and then weeks passed, and they didn't find an opportunity for us to do it. Finally, just before we were going to leave, a truck showed up at our hotel at five in the morning. And all of us who were going to weed between the rows of sugarcane managed to get ourselves onto the back of the truck. I should add that my first socialist honor was that I was elected "*vanguardia del grupo*."

EZ: Did you enter Cuba as a left-leaning liberal and exit as a socialist?

JC: No, I was already a pretty convinced leftist when I got to Cuba and didn't need any help.

PG: Did any part of your thinking shift while you were there?

JC: Yeah, I worried a lot about the fact that the regime wasn't able to put goods in stores. The only thing you could find in the Woolworth's—which was still open, by the way—were purple and green trivets made out of some kind of straw that cost practically nothing because nobody wanted them. So it was beginning to show—that there were problems with the way the economy was being managed. At one point, I was sitting at dinner with two or three other students. We'd been having very good liver for most of the time we were in Havana, and at that table I learned that it was because they were killing too many cows. They were clearly going to run out of steers, and food more generally, if they didn't plan more carefully. I worried about whether the economy was going to work.

EZ: Did you ever make it back to Cuba?

JC: Pat and I went back several times during the *período especial*.² We've also gone more recently, two or three times.

PG: So how did you end up at the University of Wisconsin? Was that the most logical place for someone like you at that time?

JC: I went there for two reasons. One was to avoid conscription, and the other was to study with William Appleman Williams.³ And, of course, to hang out with the New Left crowd. It turned out, though, that the New Left crowd—the folks that had worked with Williams—had left town just before I arrived.

EZ: What was your graduate student experience like?

JC: Madison is a pretty nice place. I experienced graduate school as very positive, encouraging, and open to exploration. I had never taken a course in economics before I studied with Bill Williams, but I took a graduate economics course at Wisconsin. And while I was there, I was getting a \$300-a-month stipend from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. So it was a great experience.

PG: You must have gotten a feel for interdisciplinary thinking. Did you call it “interdisciplinary” back then, or did you just consider yourself an economist?

2. The Special Period (c. 1991–2000) followed the fall of the Soviet Union and introduced radical transformations in the Cuban economy and society.

3. William Appleman Williams (1921–90) was a revisionist US historian and prominent critic of the Cold War, widely known for his book *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959).

JC: I probably would not have called myself an economist. If the Woodrow Wilson Foundation wanted me to say I was interdisciplinary, I would just say that I'd taken courses in economics and other things. I didn't become much involved in the Latin American Center of Wisconsin. There were a good number of Latin American students there, many of them associated with the Land Tenure Center. My time at Wisconsin mostly reinforced my interest in economics, economic development, and economic history. And I met some people who became lifelong friends.

PG: Was Thomas Skidmore there?

JC: Skidmore was there. It was his second or third year. He was a good teacher.

PG: Did you have any particular influences in the Madison history department during that time? Did you have a mentor?

JC: Not really, that was more the case at Wesleyan. There were two or three faculty in History who were really very good there. But I didn't have that kind of experience at Madison.

PG: How did you move to the question of the Mexican railroads?

JC: That's a long and complicated story, but there are two easy points to make. The first is that one of the hottest topics in US economic history at the time was the economic impact of railroads. There was a huge fight between Robert Fogel at [the University of] Chicago and Leonard Fisher at Columbia. Fisher turned out to be very helpful in finding a way to get me to Columbia.

EZ: If the debate was centered in the United States, why did you pivot to Mexico?

JC: At that time, I was interested in becoming an economic historian in parts of the world where there wasn't much economic history. I sensed an opportunity and pursued it.

EZ: But you had never been to Mexico, I assume. Had you been anywhere in Latin America other than Cuba at that point?

JC: No, not yet. I became a Mexicanist when I returned from Cuba, because the officials at the airport confiscated everybody's passports. At the time, you could get into Mexico by just showing your birth certificate. You didn't have to have a passport, which worked for me since my passport had been confiscated. It limited my choice to Mexico.

PG: It sounds like a blessing in disguise. When did you get another passport?

JC: That's a funny story. In 1975, Pat and I were living in Mexico City. One morning I was on my way to the archive, and just as I was leaving the apartment, I received a call. I heard the voice of a young man on the other end: "Hello, is John Coatsworth there?" I said, "Yes, this is he." He gave his name and said, "I'm calling you from the US Embassy." I responded, "How do you know I'm here? I didn't check in or anything." He sensed a certain tension on the line and quickly assured me that he was calling because the court decision [Staughton Lynd v. Dean Rusk] had required the secretary of state to reissue our passports, and I could come and pick them up anytime.

PG: Was it the ACLU or somebody else who intervened?

JC: There was a lawsuit that resulted in a decision by the State Department. It involved a guy who died recently [2022], Staughton Lynd. Lynd had gone to North Vietnam, and he challenged the revocation of his passport two or three years before we did. So his case got to the Supreme Court faster.

PG: Right, his story is amazing. He was the son of sociologist Robert Lynd, who had done work on factories in the Midwest. He was an amazing figure. But let's go back to Mexico.

EZ: When did you arrive in Mexico? Wasn't it around the start of 1968?

JC: We arrived in Mexico in the spring of '68 and quickly got connected to the student movement.

EZ: So almost immediately after you arrived, the country blew up.

JC: It was blowing up already by the time we got there. We had people hiding out in our apartment in the Zona Rosa. And we had to stay off the streets for some time. They closed the university. That took a while to sort out.

EZ: Not very conducive to doing research, I imagine.

PG: Where did you do most of your research when things settled down?

JC: The most useful archive was the Archivo Histórico de la SCOP, the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas, which was later renamed the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes. The archive was in what were once the maid's quarters on the roof of the SCOP building in downtown Mexico City. It's

across the street from behind the Banco de México. They had all of the annual reports of all of the railroads in Mexico during the Porfiriato. I spent a lot of time just collecting the data. And I was really lucky, because I don't know how I ever would have found a source of data that was as good as the one I happened to stumble upon.

That archive was run by a 19-year-old high school dropout from Acapulco who was very helpful. I couldn't copy all the numbers I needed, so I had to get many of the annual reports photocopied. For that, I needed somebody in an official position who would go tell the Archivo Nacional, located four or five blocks away, to photocopy whatever this guy brings you. And, miracle of miracles, they did.

PG: How long was your period in Mexico? Were you there in October of 1968?⁴

JC: We arrived in February of '68, and we went home in '69.

EZ: Did you form many friendships when you were there? You eventually became lifetime friends with Enrique Semo, Adolfo Gilly, and others. Did you know them at the time?

JC: I didn't know any of them at the time. When I got to Mexico City, I had just one contact, Josefina Vázquez, whose name I'd been given by Bill Taylor, a historian at Wisconsin.⁵ Josefina had some connection with Harvard and liked Americans and wanted to be helpful. She did two wonderful things: first, she noticed that the Mexican and US presidents were going to be meeting in '68 or '69. Through that meeting, they created a scholarship program in which you would get 100 pesos a month from the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. Josefina helped me apply, and I became "*becario numero uno*" in this very prestigious program.

She also put me in touch, oddly enough, with Friedrich Katz.⁶ Friedrich was teaching in East Germany but had come to Mexico as a visiting professor at

4. Beginning in late July of 1968, massive student-led demonstrations in protest of the government's authoritarian practices challenged the regime's political legitimacy and threatened to mar the XIX Olimpiad scheduled to open in Mexico City on October 12. On October 2, government forces massacred scores of students and innocent bystanders in the Plaza of the Three Cultures, also known as Tlatelolco.

5. William Taylor is a historian of colonial Mexico whose first book, *Landlord and Peasant in Colonial Mexico* (1972), was based on his 1969 doctoral dissertation under the mentorship of Charles Gibson. Josefina Zoraida Vázquez is a prominent Mexican historian of the nineteenth century and of US-Mexico relations.

6. Friedrich Katz (1927–2010) was a renowned historian of Mexico whose family found exile in Mexico in 1941 after fleeing Nazi-occupied Austria.

UNAM, but when the university closed down, he couldn't teach.⁷ He was at loose ends doing some research. Josefina noticed that there was some connection. Friedrich sounded very interesting, so when she gave me his telephone number I called him. We agreed to meet for coffee on Insurgentes Sur, right by the university.

PG: And what was your first impression of Friedrich?

JC: That he was a smart guy. And very nice. Pat and I invited him to dinner with his wife [Jana]. Pat prepared *huachinango a la veracruzana*, which I'm sure Friedrich would have liked if he wasn't allergic to hot chilies.

PG: What did you talk about?

JC: I talked about how to deal with international inequality. We talked about Paul Baran's book—which we had all read—as being too simple-minded.⁸ That wasn't Friedrich's critique, but it was mine.

PG: That was *The Political Economy of Growth*, right?

JC: Yes, that was about as close as you could get to something that was theoretically interesting from a Marxist scholar. But it wasn't helpful enough.

PG: So you kept in contact with Friedrich Katz?

JC: Yeah, I wanted to hire him right away. Every year, in a castle in Austria, scholars, intellectuals, and historians come together by invitation of some Austrian organization that's perfectly respectable. Friedrich had given a paper there some years before, and it really impressed the guy who at that time was chair of the Anthropology Department at Chicago. The same guy later became the provost [Robert McCormick Adams].

JC: Pat and I were having dinner at the Adamses' house and I was talking about what a great scholar Friedrich was. Adams responded very positively and agreed with me that we should try to get him to Chicago. That was the crucial thing, having the provost's backing. I managed to maneuver myself into chairing the search committee, but I think having the provost on board was super helpful.

7. The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) was occupied by military forces in September in an attempt to squash the student movement.

8. Paul Baran (1909-64) was a Russian-born Marxist economist and Professor at Stanford University. His first book was *The Political Economy of Growth* (1957). A posthumously published book, *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Economic and Social Order* (1966), was co-authored with political activist and Marxist economist, Paul Sweezy, founder of the Marxist journal *Monthly Review*.

PG: Adams was a very important person. Some people have said that he's the inspiration for Indiana Jones. But how did *you* end up at Chicago? Is it true you were ABD [all-but-dissertation] when you arrived there?

JC: Yes, that's true. Pat had told me that wherever we ended up, it would have to be a city with a minimum of 150,000 people, and it had to be north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The problem was that no one who was the slightest bit interested in me met those two criteria. I had to get busy, so I wrote to two friends from Wisconsin who were at Chicago, Don Scott and Joan Scott.⁹ And even though there was a search underway, the Scotts managed to arrange an informal visit. I didn't have to give a talk. Instead, the American History group took me out to lunch. During lunch, I managed to insult the chairman of the committee. Afterward, Don said, "Well, it was nice that you came, but of course, you have no prospects here because you just told the chairman of the search committee that he's an idiot."

PG: How did it turn around for you?

JC: It turned around because the job in American History didn't turn out, so I could flip to [teaching] Latin America.

EZ: You were being hired for a US position initially?

JC: Right, because they only needed one Latin American historian, or so they thought. And Herb Klein was that person.¹⁰ But then sometime later in the spring he got an offer from Columbia and left. And suddenly they had no one to teach these courses except for this Coatsworth person. They had all my letters of recommendation, which said things like, "Coatsworth is a brilliant historian, but he's a radical person involved in all kinds of politics. And while we don't know what that's about, he seems to be doing reasonably well as an academic." So I got hired to take over for Herb Klein.

EZ: Did you have any understanding of what the University of Chicago was at that point?

JC: No. I knew something about the Chicago Boys and so on, but not very much.

9. Donald Scott is a historian of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century US history; Joan Wallach Scott is a US historian of France, known especially for her contributions to gender history and post-structural theory.

10. Herbert Klein is a prominent historian of Latin America who received his undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Chicago.

PG: How was the History department? How did they treat you in those first years?

JC: They were actually very polite, because the year before I got there they had fired their radical historian.

PG: Jesse Lemisch, right?¹¹ That was still a burning case when I was an undergraduate. He worked on the labor history of sailors, if I remember right.

JC: Was he the one that lost his dissertation in an airport? In any case, yes, there was a radical precedent. But since I wore a tie and didn't irritate people, I was seen as a positive. If you're going to hire a radical, you should have somebody who says "please" and "thank you."

EZ: You were never really part of the cultural New Left. Why didn't you ever let your hair grow long?

JC: I guess for the simple reason that it seemed tactically stupid. It didn't seem to me that challenging people at the level of visual cultural biases was the smartest thing to do.

EZ: Were you trying to be a contrarian, or were you trying to stay under the radar? What was your strategy in donning the suit and tie at a moment when there' was a pretty dramatic cultural shift happening in the country?

JC: Well, the cultural shift that was happening in the country was not viewed favorably by the people who held the fate of my career in their hands. And I didn't have any principled objection to wearing a suit and tie.

PG: Maybe those years spent in Columbus paid off. The polite Midwesterner identity worked out.

EZ: When Friedrich joined you at Chicago not that long afterward, you guys became a team. How did that come about? How quick was that transformation, and what did that mean for you?

JC: You've got two different personalities. One of them is Friedrich Katz, who's a wonderful person but a bureaucratic incompetent. He gets stuff done as he has to, but he does so by getting people enlisted to help him. And that's the other part of

11. Jesse Lemisch (1936–2018) was a prominent New Left social historian who helped pioneer "bottom-up" history.

wearing a suit and tie: I was more effective in helping Friedrich with a suit and tie, even though Friedrich came from a European tradition, which made it seem more logical for him to wear a tie than me.

There were actually two job searches in which Friedrich appeared. In the first search, they invited Friedrich to come because he was in Texas [University of Texas at Austin] on a visiting position. He came and gave a talk on his Pancho Villa project, which was a big success. Then a second search committee was set up, which I chaired. There were a couple of people who didn't like the idea that he was coming from East Germany, but Friedrich really played the art of the Austria card with consummate skill.¹²

PG: You once told me that some people had objected to hiring a Marxist historian, saying things like Katz “was very rigid” and “talked too much” about the slavery of Indians in Yucatán.

JC: Yes, that's right. The objection that Friedrich was too rigid came from Arthur Mann.¹³ He had read a long article that Friedrich wrote on slavery, and Mann thought that applying the slavery category to the population of Yucatán at that time [i.e., the Porfiriato] didn't make any sense. But then Bentley Duncan leaped to his feet to say that Mayan Indians were being sold on the docks of Mérida.¹⁴ And that sort of quashed the objections.

There was another guy, I think named Cameron, , who did not himself get tenure but later on became an executive assistant to Hannah Grayn [President of the University of Chicago, 1978–1993]. He looked at the preface to *Ancient American Civilizations*, which was published in East Germany and said that there was a tendency to be favorable to the regime in some way. Eventually, I managed to get Friedrich to respond through me. He said that as far as he knew, he was the only historian in the entire history of the German Democratic Republic who had published a book that did not quote Heidegger.

PG: When I came to Chicago as a student in 1976, you still had not received tenure. Were they dragging because of your politics? Or was that just a rumor?

12. After completing his doctoral studies at the University of Vienna, Katz joined the faculty of Humboldt University in East Berlin in 1956. He left East Germany in 1968 following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and joined the University of Texas at Austin as a Visiting Professor before joining the University of Chicago in 1971.

13. Arthur Mann (1922–93) was a US political historian at Chicago.

14. Thomas Bentley Duncan (1929–2015) was a historian of colonial Latin America and Portugal who in 1968 became the first director of Chicago's Center for Latin American Studies.

JC: Yes, but that was mostly my fault. I was still working on my dissertation when I started teaching in Chicago, and I turned in the final draft on the 14th of December. If I had waited another day, I would have been fired automatically. That would have been in 1975. I got tenure within the next three or four years after that.

PG: So you foot-dragged on your dissertation.

JC: I did, but I also got a tenure-track offer from Berkeley.

EZ: Why did you stay in Chicago? Why not go to Berkeley?

JC: A whole bunch of reasons, the most important of which was that we couldn't afford to move. We went looking at housing, and the best we could do in Berkeley itself was a four- or five-million-dollar bungalow with two bedrooms on an earthquake fault. So that didn't work for us. When I did come up for tenure [at Chicago], there were four of us up for consideration in the same year. One was Ted Cook, a colonial US historian, and a European historian, Jan Goldstein. They got tenure or had a tenure recommendation, and the other two, John Woods and me, were offered five-year contracts with the promise that they would hire us with tenure when they could afford it.

EZ: At what point did you and Friedrich develop a strategic plan to forge a Latin American history graduate program? Or did it just evolve on its own?

JC: It sort of evolved over time. A key moment was in 1974, when Joe Love at Champaign [University of Illinois] decided he wanted to revive a Title VI center, which Illinois had once had in cooperation with the University of Chicago.¹⁵ And so he trundled up to Hyde Park to propose that we try to get a Title VI center, which would be good for our graduate students since they would get fellowships, and also good for the faculty. I went to see the dean of Social Sciences, who was a statistician of such renown that there is an actual statistic that's named after him: the Kruskal tau.

I explained what we were considering to Kruskal. He heard "Latin American," and said, "You're not talking about the people that live in these neighborhoods around the university, are you?" I said, "No, those are Latinos." He finally approved and we went ahead. It worked. Joe did a good portion of the work, and by the next year we had a Title VI center and we were able to do things for graduate students and others. It worked out very well.

15. Joseph Love is a prominent historian of Brazil.

PG: With Title VI, more and more graduate students began to come to Chicago, especially Mexicans. I recall that you had a connection to the Colegio de México and that a lot of their students came to Chicago as well.

JC: I taught at the Colegio in '74 and '75. That's why we were in Mexico City then. The other part of it was just spontaneous. You'd think we would sit down and think about what our reasonable goals were, figuring out how to achieve them, but we didn't. I think we were just too busy.

PG: It was the time period, too. After the Sixties and the Cuban Revolution, the interest in Latin American history was growing nationally as an academic field. And there were you guys, developing Mexico into this very strong field. There weren't very many other places that had such a strong faculty as Chicago—Berkeley or Harvard, maybe.

JC: Yes, but we were kind of unbalanced. History was all about Mexico and politics was all about Brazil. I don't think we went out of our way to attract people to the department. We were pleasant enough when people showed up, but we didn't pluck people out of the Latin American Masters program and order them to go into the doctoral program.

PG: I think you're being modest. You were an excellent mentor for younger scholars. You created a very welcoming and open environment at the University of Chicago, which was sometimes a bit cold and harsh. You and Friedrich both were very welcoming.

JC: That's just the sort of people we were. But our colleagues began telling us that we were treating our graduate students very well, and that this was a good thing. This was said by some of our colleagues who didn't always treat their own graduate students well.

PG: By the 1980s, Chicago was really one of the biggest centers for studying Latin American history at the graduate level.

JC: And certainly, the largest Latin American History program.

EZ: And also, incredibly diverse in terms of the types of people and projects that came out of that program. No two projects were alike. My experience as a graduate student—something that talking with people at other graduate programs reinforced—is that you guys were very hands-off, in a good sense. You had guardrails for us, and you would push and prod with questions, but you didn't intervene in our projects. You didn't micromanage any projects.

PG: Except for one thing: John was a line editor. You felt very strongly about the language of dissertations and papers.

EZ: It's true, I learned a lot of grammar from your notes.

PG: I learned about parallel constructions in my senior year of college.

EZ: But I think that hands-off quality allowed a thousand flowers to bloom in terms of the types of projects that came out of that epoch.

JC: Yeah, Friedrich and I were horrified when we saw graduate students being pushed in one direction or another so strongly that they couldn't pursue their own interests. Some of them were badly abused. There were some dissertations written at Chicago that were just long and glowing footnotes to the genius that had served as their thesis advisor.

PG: Speaking of genius, here's a follow-up question about your intellectual project during that period. I remember very clearly that you had a strong identity in the department: yes, you were a Marxist or neo-Marxist and believed in all those leftist ideas, but you also had a very strong belief that Marxism should relate to the social sciences of American universities and that quantitative evidence, empirical evidence, and clarity were just as important. You were trying, it seemed, to blend the two, for example, in the *New Economic History* or in interdisciplinary areas through LASA [Latin American Studies Association] You really seemed to be interested in blending Marxist social thinking with American social science.

JC: That's what I was trying to do. And if that was to be successful, if there was a way of translating Marxism and Marxist categories into a language that could debate clearly and reasonably with American social science, I felt it should be pursued. Because Marxism and American social science were self-consciously similar, although you don't find very much recognition of that.

PG: How were they similar? What was your insight there?

JC: I don't know if I had any specific insight. But I did think that the categories of Marxist analysis had to be helpful to people who shared a methodological and theoretical commitment to good social science.

PG: How did this express itself in your own work, in your economic histories of Mexico?

JC: I think the place where it's clearest is in an early article I wrote while I was in Mexico, which the *American Historical Review* published.¹⁶ There, I tried to use Marxist categories to reframe some aspects of nineteenth-century Mexican economic history.

EZ: And what about CASPIC [Council for Advanced Studies in Peace and Cooperation]. I'm curious, because CASPIC was very intellectually influential for me in my thinking about interdisciplinarity.¹⁷ How did that come about?

JC: That was something that I worked on with Ruth Adams, who was the editor of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* and the wife of Robert McCormick Adams. She ran a section of the MacArthur Foundation and had a huge amount of money to spend, and a huge necessity to get some of it spent quickly. Otherwise, the foundation was going to have to pay a lot of taxes. So that turned out to be a nice partnership.

EZ: And the money was to bring in outside lecturers?

JC: Yes, speakers, seminars, joint teaching, and so on. John Mearsheimer and I taught a couple of courses together.¹⁸

PG: That's an interesting couple.

JC: It was offered as a set of courses and activities to influence the way people thought about international affairs.

PG: You had this important thing in the 1980s where you were working with the Social Science Research Council. You and Friedrich together were part of this project about peasants, revolutions, and revolts. You really furthered this project. You were also pretty important on the council, weren't you?

JC: Yes, I was a member of the Joint Committee on Latin American Studies. And the publication that grew out of that focus on peasants and rural rebellions was the book that Friedrich created, *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution*.¹⁹ That was something that the Social Science Research Council supported, because it brought all the

16. John Coatsworth, "Obstacles to Economic Growth in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," *American Historical Review* 88:1 (February 1978): 80–99.

17. CASPIC was a multi-year MacArthur Foundation grant that supported interdisciplinary teaching and research at a moment in the late 1980s when scholars were beginning to critique the boundaries of area studies.

18. John Mearsheimer is a prominent political scientist and "realist" international relations theorist at the University of Chicago.

19. Friedrich Katz, ed., *Riot, Rebellion, and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1988).

people that wrote the essays together to present in the volume. That was something that Friedrich and I were very committed to.

PG: You were very interested in peasants?

JC: To have a career when most of your colleagues are not interested in what you're doing, or don't even know what it is—that takes a certain amount of flexibility.

PG: Are you saying people were not interested in your work on the marginal productivity of railroads?

JC: That would not be an understatement.

PG: Except that Bob Fogel was your colleague at Chicago.²⁰

JC: Yes, that's right. I think economic history is not at the top of anybody's list for Latin American historiography. My career might have gone a different way if there had been a stronger positive reaction to applying that economic history in the modern way that economists did.

PG: I think you may be underestimating how important that was to Latin American historiography, because there were a lot of people in Latin America interested in economic history and influenced by Marxism. Later, by the 1990s, as Eric was saying, there was a sudden withdrawal of interest because of the postmodern turn. But at one point there were a lot of people who were interested in doing that kind of work, me included. I think you were really in the center of things at an earlier period. People were just waiting for that train book to come out.²¹

EZ: I remember being there when there was a reunion of Los Chicago Boys. It would have been in maybe '89 or '90, right along with the return of democracy in Chile. I assume you had some role in pulling that together, no?

JC: Nope! The African historian Ralph Austin organized that from beginning to end. Partly for the good reason that, if I had been organizing it, no one from the Economics Department would have participated in it.

20. Robert Fogel (1926–2013) was a prominent US economic historian who helped pioneer the New Economic History. He received the 1993 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.

21. John Coatsworth, *Growth Against Development: The Economic Impact of Railroads in Porfirian Mexico* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981).

PG: But you took a very active role around Chilean issues and human rights from the seventies and eighties and onward at Chicago.

JC: Some of the economists resented the picket lines outside their offices and felt that there should be some kind of discipline applied to people who did that. They were quite unhappy, actually.

PG: But that didn't deter you?

JC: No, and in any case, I wasn't doing very much. It was you guys who were terrifying them.

PG: But I remember you took a very strong role around the issue. I remember you debated some of the Chilean students and that you had an enormous knowledge of the intricacies of the Chilean economy.

JC: That was the thing that irritated me the most, the claim that Pinochet had better economics than the predecessor civilian policymakers in Chile. It's just fascinating. If you go back and pick up the five most widely read books on the Pinochet economy, you have to work really hard to find any place where the author will tell you what the rate of economic growth was during the 17 years of the Pinochet dictatorship. It's well below the comparable period before that coup. So a lot of what was said about how effective his economic policies were was just nonsense.

I found the gathering that Ralph Austin organized for the Chicago Boys to be fascinating. The people there went to defend the Economics Department and talked about how "good economics" is good for economics. [Arnold C.] Harberger and others talked about how important it was for their students to roll up their sleeves for better economic policy.²² I think it was in his last remark on that panel that Harberger said, "But in any case, I've never accepted a penny from that regime." And that was his final statement, which was just outrageous. The whole panel should have started at that point, with Harberger claiming he didn't take any money from the Pinochet regime.²³

PG: You were involved in other protests, too. I remember the speech you gave about Robert McNamara.²⁴ I guess it would have been 1980, when the university wanted to stupidly give him an award as some kind of peacemaker or

22. Arnold Carl Harberger is a US economist who began teaching at the University of Chicago in 1953.

23. In 1980, Harberger was forced to withdraw his appointment as the head of Harvard's Institute for International Development following revelations that he had been a paid consultant for the Pinochet regime.

24. Robert McNamara (1916–2009) was US Secretary of Defense from 1961–68.

something? It was very dramatic. You asked me to go to the library and look up the Nuremberg principles, and I came back and said, “Here they are.” I had no idea what you were going for, but then you began the speech in Cobb Hall: “I accuse Robert McNamara of crimes against humanity. . . .” The audience was very aroused by your speech. You were a very good public speaker. There were even riots afterward on the streets, near the Hutchinson Commons. The police arrested a lot of people. You were a fiery radical but with a tie.

EZ: You left Chicago in 1993 after 20-plus years. What were the push-pull factors that brought you to Harvard?

JC: For my first year on the Harvard faculty, I was on paid leave because I had a sabbatical year coming up at Chicago. I left Chicago in ‘92, but I didn’t really get started at Harvard until 1993.

EZ: But why the change? Were you just at the end of a run at Chicago?

JC: I would have been happy to stay. I love the place.

EZ: Did Pat want to go?

JC: Oh, yeah. It was 2,000 miles closer to our daughter and grandkids. I would have been happy to stay if she had wanted to. But 22 years is a long time, and sometimes a change of venue is good.

EZ: Well, it must have been hard to leave behind that intellectual partnership with Friedrich.

JC: There are a lot of people we missed once we moved.

EZ: When you went to Harvard, you were recruited for what I’m guessing was a different purpose—to build up the Rockefeller Center.

JC: Yes, although they didn’t tell me that. And I felt that if I didn’t like what I was being offered, or what I was expected to do, I didn’t have to do it. Harvard has a lot of people with big hat sizes. Sometimes, Harvard thinks they’re going to do one thing, and they actually end up doing something else. The chair I was offered was the Monroe Gutmann Professorship of Latin American Affairs. The first recipient of that endowed chair was Gino Germani, the Italo-Argentine sociologist. In the immediate postwar period, Germani delayed and delayed coming to Cambridge, until he finally decided he would come. But he wanted the university to know that he didn’t think Argentine history

was particularly important or interesting any more, and that he was going back to working on Italy. He stayed in the chair and taught Italian history for the next 20 years.

EZ: And Harvard said, “And by the way, we need you to bring this program together?”

JC: That’s more or less what happened. We were moving into our house in Cambridge in the late summer of 1993, and the History Department secretary called up all breathless to say that the president of the university wanted to speak to me. When I went in to see him the next week, Neil [Neil Leon Rudenstine] talked about putting together a Latin American center. He worked at the Mellon Foundation. A year before, I had done a 20- or 30-page report on the state of Latin American Studies in the United States, in which I recommended that somebody bring a Latin American center to Harvard. After reading that report, Neil Rudenstine went to see David Rockefeller and talked him into financing it. Eventually, he gave 11 million dollars.

PG: That was a lot of money back then.

JC: It was, and a lot of it went toward endowing fellowships, scholarships and visiting scholars.

PG: You really brought the program alive, because I had lived in that area before, and there wasn’t a lot of activity. But by the time you left, everybody knew about the Rockefeller Center. What was your secret to making things work?

JC: Dumb luck and a sense of humor, in equally large proportions.

EZ: But did you know you had a knack for academic administration?

JC: No, I didn’t learn that I had a knack for administrative stuff until I realized that you’re not supposed to like it.

PG: But you didn’t stop, because then you went to Columbia, in the School of International and Public Affairs [SIPA], and then you became provost. When did you decide you didn’t like it?²⁵

25. Coatsworth was dean of SIPA from 2007-2011 and provost of Columbia University from 2011-2019.

JC: Actually, I never did come to the conclusion that I didn't like doing academic administration. It's a good cause, and the people you work with are among the best, most interesting, hardest-working, and most honest people. I've never felt irritated with my colleagues as people in other professions do. I also think university administrations are going to be tested. Maybe I'm reading the signs wrong, but I think we're in for a lot of trouble.

EZ: Do you mean higher education in general? What are the problems you're seeing?

JC: Problems like terrorizing Chinese and Chinese American faculty for contacts they have in their country of origin. There is a lot of criticism in newspapers that reminds you a bit of the McCarthy era. Harvard had a chemist, a very distinguished man, whose career was just ruined by an absolutely false prosecution. And I think it's not going to get any better anytime soon.

EZ: If you were 20 years younger, would you feel the urge to jump in and manage? Or are you glad you're out?

JC: I'm kind of glad I'm out. But I don't know how much I'll be able to resist the temptation to jump back in and start hollering at people.

PG: How do you feel about the overall situation with the history field, the social sciences, and the humanities? Do you get a sense that we're beleaguered by the universities' interest in more science-oriented topics?

JC: There are two realities. One of them is that humanities and some social sciences programs have been downsizing. I think that's famously the result of a second factor, which is very evident at Columbia, and elsewhere, which is that it's very hard to justify an academic program that produces people with a degree that nobody wants to hire. Two years ago, our Department of English and Comparative Literature gave out 17 PhDs, and at the end of the year not a single one of them had a job. So, what to do about that?

EZ: It kind of reinforces itself.

JC: It does. The issue is, is there some way of increasing demand for people with that perspective and skill set? I don't see much in the way of imaginative programs that are trying to do that. And I wouldn't know where to start.

EZ: Having come of intellectual and activist age in an era of great optimism in the 1960s, not to mention becoming an academic in a period when people were

working through questions of economic development in some of the darkest moments of the 70s and 80s, what's your takeaway on contemporary Latin American politics?

JC: I find that a lot of countries that were intelligible to me 50 years ago are no longer that way today. Or, they're the site of struggles that I don't see a future in. There must be one, but I don't know what it would be. For example, the shift to cultural and identity issues as the defining agenda for the future of the field.

PG: What about Mexico and all the shifts in politics since 2000, like the end of the PRI? Also, what about the rise of violence in Mexico? We used to think of Mexico as the most stable country in the region, and now it's almost the opposite.

JC: These are things I don't understand. I don't understand why Cuba ended up the way it is. I don't understand how Venezuela got to the point where millions of its people have left the country. I don't understand why Colombia is in such bad shape when it should be so much better. And Chile, I don't understand at all. I want to be encouraged. I've read some things about a leftward turn. I don't think of Gabriel Boric [Chile's President] as a classic social democrat. There's something else going on there.

EZ: Is there anything that you're writing now, or want to write?

JC: I'm still thinking about it. I don't know what I have the energy to do. And I don't know that I have much clarity to offer in a world that is not as intelligible as I once thought it was. I miss the Soviet Union, actually. It kind of organized everybody.

PG: You always have a very clear way of thinking through things and saying things. That was one of your biggest influences as a teacher. You taught us all to think firmly and clearly about things.

JC: That's certainly what I was trying to do.

EZ: It's about figuring out how to ask the right question. That's certainly what I learned from you in graduate school.

PG: Is there anything else that you see as your legacy? Or is that word too scary?

JC: It's too pompous. What makes me happy is to see people that I worked with do interesting things and make lives for themselves. It's a great field to work in. It's a wonderful life.

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