Introduction: A Kingdom of Vast Extension

The Kingdom of Guatemala in the late eighteenth century was a paradox. It was simultaneously rich and poor, according to its colonial administrators, priests, merchants, and ordinary residents. It was a ‘kingdom of vast extension’ that should by all accounts be a wealthy province within the Spanish empire, as puzzled observers noted. As the Spanish administrative region spanning modern-day Chiapas, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, it had great natural advantages, from being a place where ‘the most exquisite fruits of all climes grow in abundance’ to possessing harbours on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. Indeed, it might well be ‘the best of all the King’s possessions’. Yet, as a contributor to Guatemala’s newspaper remarked in 1803, ‘this kingdom, which should be one of the most prosperous, is one of the most miserable ones in America’. How to square these contradictions, and help fulfil the true potential of the region, was the mission of a group of reformers who came together in patriotic associations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They believed that geographical, climatic, botanical, agricultural, and demographic knowledge held the key to ‘enlightened’ progress. True patriots would not just be content with gathering such knowledge. Instead, theirs was a practical Enlightenment that would offer prosperity by applying scientific knowledge to the management of landscapes. As this book argues, Central American reformers found the meaning of a homeland not in abstract ideas of idealised national landscapes, but in experiential engagement with them.

By the early nineteenth century, reformers imagined a new region, one that was self-confidently connected to the rest of the world through scientific communication networks, and one whose inhabitants were dedicated to developing its bountiful landscapes into ever more prosperous spaces. Although patriotic identities of the eighteenth century map onto nineteenth-century nationalisms imprecisely at best, the legacy of new visions of Central

1 ‘Apuntamientos estadísticos del Br. Talamábida, sobre la agricultura, industria y comercio de este reyno’, *Gazeta de Guatemala* (hereafter: *Gazeta*), Vol. 7, no. 313 (25 July 1803), 297; ‘Descripción geográfica’, *Gazeta*, Vol. 6, no. 279 (2 October 1802), 245. While Costa Rica was technically a part of this jurisdiction, the Audiencia (High Court) had little effective power there.
America created by late-colonial reformers shaped the nation-states that emerged after the region’s independence from Spain in 1821. Statesmen would draw on these earlier shifts in thinking about nature and strategies for managing landscapes to help define national identities within a larger Central American Federation, as well as the place of Central America in global networks. This contribution of the natural world to ideas of identity and nationalism has sometimes been placed in the realm of the literary, the learned, the intellectual. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has pointed to the legacies of a scientific patriotism in the nineteenth century as offering ‘ideological tools that allowed those communities to think of themselves as central to the world’, while Mark Thurner has made the argument for the intellectual history of Peru that a ‘romantico-scientific’ idea of soil and natural productions was a crucial hallmark in the formation of the idea of a ‘nation’. Central American scientific Enlightenment must certainly be placed in the context of such intellectual traditions, and the reformers’ most ambitious goals of a social and environmental transformation of entire tracts of land indeed remained merely a powerful ideal.

However, exponents of enlightened reform in the eighteenth century insisted that their patriotic worlds were already taking shape in the countryside. They constructed patriotic ideals not just from studying landscapes, but from intervening in them. Their ideals had much in common with other scientific-patriotic traditions of Spanish America embodied by José Antonio de Alzate y Ramírez, Hipólito Unanue, José Celestino Mutis, or Francisco José de Caldas, who argued that scientific knowledge was at its most useful when it found practical application. Central American reformers doubled down on these concepts of utility and applicability forcefully and made it clear that it was the practical effects of knowledge that concerned them. Although they also developed a particular localist epistemology to fend off doubts about the reliability of different kinds of knowledge, information was not an end in itself. Instead, reformers worked within a political-economic framework of controlling landscapes and labourers rather than an abstract learned one. They attempted to intervene directly in agricultural activities, planned new villages,
acclimatised plants, designed infrastructure projects, and even tried to improve public health through controlling vegetation. Indeed, the late eighteenth century was a time of particular importance when it came to thinking about landscapes and their potential for change in the Kingdom of Guatemala (also known as the Audiencia de Guatemala), in practical terms as much as in the sense of patriotically imagined abundant soils. The memory of recent natural disasters, such as a major 1773 earthquake, still loomed large, while reformers drew new lessons from other natural disturbances, such as overgrown roads, rains, and locust plagues. The questions that members of the colonial administration asked of topographies, the travels of merchants, the agricultural and natural-historical designs of scholars and ‘enthusiasts’, as well as the practices of farmers who worked the land, helped to draw up their new programme for imagining progress that was built around experiences and understandings of landscape.

To speak of ‘landscapes’ in this context may be an anachronistic amalgamation of a number of Spanish concepts that are discussed in this book such as país, tierras, terreno, montaña or even temperamento or clima, but it is a fitting concept because of its multi-layered ability to encompass man-made as well as natural space, the physical environment, and human settlements. In addition, across Spanish America governments and scholars themselves were preoccupied with creating knowledge about these spaces. Many historians have consequently noted the importance of spatial practices to understanding the governance and intellectual culture of Spanish America. Drawing on the work of historical geographers, landscape is here taken to be the ‘surface of the land’ as perceived and recorded (and therefore constructed as landscape) by bureaucrats, engineers, reformers, farmers, and travellers. Although these perceptions never resembled a nineteenth-century sense of the ‘picturesque’, any implication of a European


‘gaze’ in the use of ‘landscape’ in this book reflects this history of largely European or Creole authors recording their attempts to make sense of a country. Definitions of landscape as social and cultural construct do not negate the importance of materiality. They rather underscore the importance of conceptualising the land through mapping and bureaucratic practices in eighteenth-century state governance, as well as through civic reform. In the case of Guatemala, George Lovell and Severo Martínez Peláez have drawn influential conclusions about landscape as a historical category. George Lovell is concerned with the ‘cultural landscape’ of the Cuchumatanes region as a whole, that is, the interaction of history, land, and people. For Martínez Peláez, landscape is a more narrow and necessarily superficial term that appears as a foil to contrast with a true understanding of the land as means of production, but has explanatory power in the erasures of indigenous labour it contains. My argument is influenced by these observations about the relationship between land, governance, and people. However, this book also contends that descriptions of landscapes broadly conceived as they appear in a variety of archival documents of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reveal further intellectual worlds and practical attitudes alike.

These intellectual and practical worlds came together in the actions of a patriotic association founded by a group of men who saw themselves as enlightened reformers, the Real Sociedad Económica de Amantes de la Patria de Guatemala, from 1795 onwards. It became the key forum for exchanging knowledge deemed ‘useful’ in the sense that it could be applied to Central American landscapes. In bringing new ideas and scientific knowledge to their projects, the reformers drew on a range of sources from local as well as more global correspondents. Their ideologies and practices can therefore be better

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8 Royal Economic Society of the Lovers of the Homeland of Guatemala. Historians often interchangeably refer to it as Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País or Royal Economic Society of Friends of the Country of Guatemala, since some official correspondence refers to it that way, but its own statutes and publications are by the name of ‘amantes de la patria’. The classic work is Elisa Luque Alcaide, *La Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País de Guatemala* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1962), which mainly relies on archival documentation from the AGI. José Luis Maldonado Polo, *Las huellas de la razón: la expedición científica de Centroamérica (1795–1803)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2001) also outlines many of the Economic Society’s activities, and biographical information on the Central American Enlightenment’s main proponents.
understood by thinking spatially about the practice of scientific knowledge. This approach draws the established link between science and the affirmation of American identities into dialogue with historical geography and the spatial history of science, and is more broadly influenced by the ‘spatial turn’ in intellectual history and the history of science over the last three decades.9 For Guatemala, it relies especially on Sylvia Sellers-García’s work for understanding the possibilities of correspondence and conceptions of distance.10 In Central America, increasingly localist views of spaces developed through the practical application of scientific and other empirical knowledge. Although these projects of useful nature did not define future national boundaries, they helped to re-imagine the relationship between different regions. However, these spatial views were often contradictory and fragmented, especially during the early independence period, as Jordana Dym’s conclusions on the construction of political and cultural spaces have demonstrated.11 The ‘patriotism’ of these eighteenth-century reformers did not meaningfully prefigure the political territories of the nineteenth century. Instead, reformers’ efforts took place in a broader context of imperial governance, where enlightened ideas interacted with local social and economic priorities and routine bureaucratic practices.12 Theirs was less a coherent intellectual programme than a patchwork of specific responses and solutions to social, economic, or geographical problems that they perceived around them.13 There are similarities here to the observations of Lina


10 Sylvia Sellers-García, Distance and Documents at the Spanish Empire’s Periphery (Stanford University Press, 2014).


12 Renán Silva, Los Ilustrados de la Nueva Granada, 1760–1808: genealogía de una comunidad de interpretación (Medellín: Banco de la República; EAFIT, 2002), 48–9, calls this the ‘context of application’ of enlightened ideas.

del Castillo and especially María José Afanador Llach, who have recently described a blending of political-economic thought and geographical knowledge for the case of New Granada and independent Colombia.\textsuperscript{14} I argue that reformers’ belief in the material consequences of practical interventions rather than just a detached vision of landscape helped to shape imaginations of territory. This case study alongside the Colombian parallels therefore suggests that ideas of the nation-state across Latin America were constructed by a larger range of colonial and independent, political, and scientific influences than has hitherto been recognised. If there was a spatial dimension to patriotism, it was the extent of the places where reform impacted the cultural landscape, what we might call the ‘territory of intervention’. The reformers’ homeland was an ever-shifting concept, able to accommodate political changes in the geographical territory.

**Enlightenment and Reform**

Ideas about the improvement and management of nature emerged within the context of two much-debated historical phenomena: the Enlightenment, and the Spanish Empire’s so-called Bourbon Reforms. For self-proclaimed Central American reformers, they provided a set of tools as well as values: a belief in progress through applied scientific learning and ideals of good governance, but also an institutional framework to support associations dedicated to the furthering of these causes, including not just the Economic Society but also the Guatemala City merchant association, the Consulado de Comercio, which was established in 1793 and often supported similar ideals. Economic Societies, or Patriotic Societies as they were sometimes known, had originated on the Spanish mainland (following models from other continental European countries) and were encouraged by the Crown overseas.\textsuperscript{15} As ‘quasi-governmental’ organisations, to use Gabriel Paquette’s term, their objective was a broader revitalisation of commerce and trade as well as promotion of locally specific initiatives covering everything from growing more wheat to establishing schools, which would in turn lead to felicidad pública, or ‘public

\textsuperscript{14} María José Afanador Llach, ‘Political Economy, Geographical Imagination, and Territory in the Making and Unmaking of New Granada, 1739–1830’ (PhD dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2016); Lina del Castillo, *Crafting a Republic for the World: Scientific, Geographic, and Historiographic Inventions of Colombia* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

happiness’. Since these were voluntary associations, but not ‘private’ in the sense distinguished, for instance, by Henry Lowood in the context of similar German societies, the reformers’ actions had the capacity to be tied not just to their roles as ‘patriots’ but as officers of the state, as village priests, as bishops. This meant that many of their members’ visions for landscape interventions were supported or even shaped by some form of state authority, as well as by more obviously non-gubernatorial forms of power such as being a landowner. Guatemala’s Economic Society was quite typical in that some of their grandest projects did not come to fruition: they did not succeed in completely transforming Central America’s economic fortunes. However, Society members’ work offers an example of remarkable ambition across different fields of knowledge, as well as the establishment of new local and global intellectual networks and print cultures which endured into the nineteenth century. This book argues that we should take seriously many scattered short reports from across the kingdom, mainly in matters of agriculture or natural history, sometimes infrastructure, geography, or medicine, which reported attempts at improvement, progress, and pride in members’ achievements. To them, this was Enlightenment in action.

Reformers often used the Spanish term las ciencias to refer to the body of structured knowledge that would render Central American nature useful. Although ciencia can be a much broader term than the English ‘science’ (encompassing all branches of knowledge), many of the Economic Society’s approaches can be described as embracing ‘scientific knowledge’ in the English meaning of the word as well. Its members, for instance, turned to natural history, geography, but also some historical archival materials as the basis for understanding landscapes, for applying new industrial methods, and as key to producing knowledge that would be useful and applicable to Central America. In 1815, the Society succinctly explained the ideology behind such useful science. In their opinion, there was a direct correlation between knowledge and wealth. Europe was the

18 A parallel can be drawn with what Cañizares-Esguerra sees as the failure of Bourbon Spain’s ultimate ambition for its scientific projects, to break Dutch and British monopolies: Nature, Empire and Nation, 127.
19 Joaquín Fernández Pérez, ‘La ciencia ilustrada y las Sociedades Económicas de Amigos del País’, in Manuel Sellés, José Luis Peset and Antonio Lafuente (eds.), Carlos III y la ciencia de la Ilustración (Madrid: Alianza, 1988), 217–32; Lowood, Patriotism, 26–7 explains that similar German societies differentiated between ‘economic’ and ‘scientific’ societies by the 1790s, but the Guatemalan society embraced all these interests. Joel Mokyr, Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain, 1700–1850 (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 188, notes that ‘enlightened agriculture’ in Britain also entailed a plethora of practices that were termed ‘useful knowledge’, but that we might not ‘recognise as formal science’.
richest part of the world, and also ‘the most enlightened [la parte mas ilustrada]’. It followed that studying and applying the sciences would give prosperity to ‘even the most sterile lands’, and unleash ‘the genius of industry’ to drive progress. Europe, however, would not be directly copied. Instead, careful selection of methodologies and sources would ensure that such scientific knowledge was relevant to Central America. In Central America, as elsewhere in Latin America, reformers considered a plethora of different branches of knowledge and an eclectic range of sources.

Eighteenth-century scholars believed that only through a holistic approach that took into account geography, political economy, medicine, demography, and natural history could their political visions be achieved. Concepts of scientific learning, utility, and progress were linked throughout European statecraft and scientific thought. Theorists of political economy from Hume to Smith engaged closely with questions of nature and its productions, while botanists at Kew, Paris, and Madrid also espoused principles of the utility of natural history to the broader political economy. From French physiocrats to Charles III’s ministers in Madrid, eighteenth-century scholars and politicians looked to the production of useful knowledge through the scientific study of nature as key to exploiting a kingdom’s natural wealth. German cameralists even imagined themselves to be leading an entirely new academic discipline that would do away with the boundaries of learned and applied knowledge in their studies of the natural world, considering political economy, agricultural, and technical approaches as one. Political economy in particular was inseparable from agronomy, natural history, and natural philosophy.

Central Americans’ attitude of selecting a range of models and influences that included, where relevant to them, Adam Smith’s writings on slavery, rice-growing

20 Periódico de la Sociedad Económica de Guatemala, No. 4 (15 June 1815), 56–8.
technologies in the Carolinas, or English technologies of spinning and weaving cotton reflected more general practices of emulation and translation within the political economies of Europe, and the interactions of political-economic theory with the practices of empire.  

Although Central Americans developed particular definitions for what they considered useful knowledge, these ideas were also part of the wider background of Spain’s ‘Bourbon Reforms’. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Spain’s new rulers of the House of Bourbon tried to implement a series of reforms in their American colonies, through policies for the most part devised by the Spanish ministers José del Campillo y Cosío, Pedro de Campomanes, José Moñino, and José de Gálvez. These reforms have been associated with Spanish ‘enlightened absolutism’ and top-down centralisation, although in Guatemala, as elsewhere in the empire, the reach of these administrative and fiscal reforms was never quite as far-reaching as their designers intended.  

Broadly speaking, their aims were a reorganisation of local administration, a stimulation of economic growth, and an attack on the privileges of religious orders, and to some extent the Church. The centrepiece of administrative reform was the establishment of intendancies, a new layer of regional government in the Americas aimed at making government more uniform and more powerful. Other aspects of the reforms promoted new philosophies of political economy (for instance, through the works of political economist Bernardo Ward), support of road-building schemes, tax reforms to increase revenue, and in the 1780s and 90s experimentation with limited free trade. They also included support for the systematic study of nature, manifested most decisively in the scientific expeditions that the Crown sent to the Americas, but also botanical gardens and cabinets of natural history.  

The most prolific of the


25 The vast historiography on botanical expeditions includes: Neil Safier, Measuring the New World: Enlightenment Science and South America (University of Chicago Press, 2008); Daniela Bleichmar, Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the
expeditions were the botanical expeditions sent to New Spain and New Granada, as well as Alejandro Malaspina’s circumnavigation of the world, and Jorge Juan and Antonio Ulloa’s participation in La Condamine’s geodetic expedition. Expeditions were often influenced by local elites, or included elements of negotiation between metropolitan and local scholars, just as local elites in many places were able to negotiate their own interests within the broader Bourbon project. While Central American elites generally welcomed the visit of some members of the New Spain expedition, principles of enlightened reform existed in Central America before and independently of this, and were influenced by a much wider array of factors, as local as they were oriented towards the overall success of the empire.

Guatemalan reformers were certain that their pursuits were ‘enlightened’. While there are few historical terms as disputed as ‘Enlightenment’, it is a useful framework for connecting these Central American reformers to global history. Historians have defined a multitude of phenomena that fall under this umbrella term, and increasingly embrace forms of Enlightenment that were not included in traditional narratives centred on northern Europe: Enlightenments among Catholics, monarchists, and anti-imperialists; ‘practical’, ‘eclectic’, and ‘agricultural’ Enlightenments; and movements not simply centred on canonical European texts. In the Spanish historical context, Francisco Sánchez-Blanco


27 Maldonado Polo, Huellas de la razón is a meticulous narrative of the expedition’s work in Guatemala. It also includes an account of the Central American Enlightenment that is based on a detailed examination of sources in the AGI, but establishes a more diffusionist model of ‘Enlightenment’ than my study, e.g. 171–4, 180–6. See also Arturo Taracena Arriola, La expedición científica al reino de Guatemala (Guatemala City: Editorial Universitaria de Guatemala, 1983); María Luisa Muñoz Calvo, ‘Las actividades de José Mariano Mociño en el Reino de Guatemala (1795–1799)’, in José Luis Peset (ed.), Ciencia, vida y espacio en Iberoamérica, Vol. 1 (Madrid: CSIC, 1989), 3–19.

has critiqued the idea that Ilustración has come to be so broad a term as to virtually be meaningless, for instance being used to refer to state interventions in anything from infrastructure to grain prices and collecting statistics, rather than a true intellectual process or agitation for social change.\footnote{29} And yet, part of what makes the multiplicity of definitions interesting is actors’ own insistence that they were performing ‘enlightened’ actions. While ‘Enlightenment’ as a historical and philosophical period is of course a retrospectively established category, Central Americans were fond of employing the terms ilustración and las luzes to describe their own work and that of their colleagues, implying knowledge and actions that would shine a metaphorical light onto darkness, or lead to transformations.\footnote{30} Priests, high- and low-ranking government administrators, and intellectuals all earnestly professed that they were implementing Enlightenment when they built roads, summarised information about medicinal plants, read scientific news from Europe, or pontificated about the climate of Central American port-towns. In this case, Enlightenment was also an actors’ category.

Self-proclaimed Central American reformers negotiated their own visions of Enlightenment, which was influenced by writers from Montesquieu to Bernardo Ward, but was ultimately guided by a localism that prioritised the applicability of any philosophy or treatise to the context and landscapes of Central America. Classic studies of the Guatemalan Enlightenment have amply demonstrated the familiarity of Central American scholars with ‘modern’ science and the writings of authors such as Condillac, Montesquieu, and Voltaire.\footnote{31} Expanding the analysis to the region’s wider intellectual environment and governance, however, to questions of geographical, botanical, and environmental knowledge, a practical Enlightenment only tangentially tied to canonical texts emerges. Partly out of theoretical conviction and partly out of sheer necessity brought on by occasionally unreliable connections with the rest of the world, reformers largely prioritised knowledge that was drawn from, or tested within, Central American landscapes.\footnote{32} In this, they were influenced and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{29} Francisco Sánchez-Blanco, La mentalidad ilustrada (Madrid: Taurus, 1999), Introduction.
\bibitem{30} A parallel study of a transformative, locally based Enlightenment can be found in the works of Bishop Martínez Compañón: Emily Berquist Soule, The Bishop’s Utopia: Envisioning Improvement in Colonial Peru (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).
\bibitem{32} An exception to such localism was the realm of formal medicine, where reformers embraced more universalist ideas of progress: Martha Few, For All of Humanity: Mesoamerican and Colonial Medicine in Enlightenment Guatemala (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2015). See also Chapter 3.
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informed by the colonial bureaucracy’s own information-gathering methods. As Bianca Premo has recently stressed, modes of thinking that were recognizably ‘enlightened’ could exist in one facet of society even while other aspects of society were rooted in older traditions. 33 Within such an Enlightenment, the old and the new, the imperial-bureaucratic and ‘scientific’ could also co-exist when it came to the production and interpretation of knowledge. María José Afanador Llach has recently made this argument for spatial knowledge in New Granada, while Margaret Ewalt has also seen a hybrid ‘eclectic’ Enlightenment in Gumilla’s natural history of the Orinoco. 34 The idea of Enlightenment as practical also had further precedents in the Hispanic world. Premo cites a prize-winning essay from Madrid’s Economic Society in which an author complained that Enlightenment should not be literary, but practical, rejecting the association with the ‘idleness of many intellectuals’. 35 Similar accusations of ‘writing panegyrics’ instead of applying oneself, or producing ‘papers and words’ instead of results, can also be seen in Guatemala. 36

The increasingly accepted view of Enlightenment as an eclectic and fragmented phenomenon, revisionist additions to the histories of European Enlightenments as well as calls for examining Enlightenments within their local social and political circumstances invite comparisons of similar ‘strands’ of Enlightenment in different geographical locations. Central American reformers were, for instance, part of a global movement focused on agricultural improvement. Central American thought on agriculture and environment, including practical encounters with the countryside, shared approaches with Scottish or British reformers identified by Fredrick Albritton Jonsson or Peter Jones. 37 Central Americans’ efforts paralleled those of European or American enlightened reformers practically as well as theoretically when they tried to acclimatise to Guatemala a collection of seeds originally collected for the British Board of Agriculture in Sumatra. Within an Enlightenment that was often paternalistic and patrician in its conceptions, the argument of ‘improving’ the landscape as a moral one that appeared in the writings of British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century botanists also came to bear in Central America, particularly when extended to debates about indigenous people as caretakers of the

35 Premo, Enlightenment on Trial, 9.
land. In different political contexts across Europe and the world, including in Central America, enlightened reformers made similar efforts to ‘conquer’ nature, often justifying physical control of the land with their supposedly superior scientific approaches.  

**Central America as a Case Study**

What made reformers believe that the Kingdom of Guatemala was an especially fertile ground for their improvement projects was also what frustrated them: Central America’s peripherality and relative economic insignificance within a Spanish empire dominated by the viceregal centres of Mexico City and Lima. In Central America, bureaucrats and scholars were often conscious of their own peripherality, even as they schemed to prove to the world that it was unjustified. Historians have emphasised the importance of supposedly ‘peripheral’ regions to empires, the potential of ‘peripheries’ to become ‘centres’ from a local perspective; and historians of science have further emphasised the particular potential of sites of natural history in peripheral places to acquire the significance of a ‘centre’. Nevertheless, many residents of Central America were painfully conscious of its peripheral status. Sylvia Sellers-García defends the ‘periphery’ as a historical category that need not be pejorative, especially for a place like Guatemala, which contemporaries often saw as difficult to reach, trade with, and administer. The director of the Economic Society complained that Guatemala was ‘unknown in the civilised world’. Given this sense of remoteness, some Spanish magistrates considered a posting in Guatemala a punishment, or a stepping stone to a better appointment. One prominent reformer complained about being posted to Comayagua, capital of the Honduras intendancy, a ‘desolate city’ full of ‘misery’ (a periphery within the periphery), while another referred to Guatemala as a ‘purgatory’ in an initial reaction to his new posting. And yet, as an isthmus with access to the Pacific

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as well as the Atlantic coasts, and neighbouring politically powerful territories such as New Spain (Mexico) and Cuba, the kingdom was geopolitically important, even if Spanish metropolitan attention often stayed focused on the coasts rather than interior of the isthmus. Part of the significance of the Audiencia de Guatemala as a case study lies in this contradiction.

Reformers’ hopes for enlightened ideas of progress were amplified by Guatemala’s perceived peripherality. Those who felt that Central America had been overlooked by Spanish imperial authorities and foreigners alike used the language of enlightened improvement to prove its worth to other parts of the empire and the wider world. They measured their progress against that of other Spanish American territories, but also against European or North American scientific and agricultural advances, even as they insisted on their own visions of Enlightenment and epistemologies. The marginality of the Audiencia de Guatemala in many networks of trade and political power made Central American reformers especially conscious of the difficulty of claiming a place in the world of knowledge, too. They clung to useful science and the effective exploitation of landscapes as a potentially transformative mechanism for asserting Central America’s presence within the empire and a wider world. The issues they tackled in the process, negotiating between the local and the global, the particular and the universal, were familiar to any eighteenth-century scholar. However, for Central Americans, the gulf to be overcome between the particular and the universal seemed especially wide at times. The perception that Guatemalan landscapes were as remote, threatening, and ‘exceptionally harsh and mountainous’ as they were vast and fertile would make overcoming these challenges with the help of enlightened ideas a particular achievement, and meant that the transformative promise of Enlightenment was especially great in the context of such desolation.

The landscapes of Central America were home to a society that was highly unequal and deeply hierarchical. Modern historians have estimated a population of 920,409 in the Kingdom of Guatemala in 1800. Nueva Guatemala, which counted a population of nearly 26,000 by 1812, was by far the largest city. Indians and Creoles were the majority, with Spaniards making up as few as 10 per cent of the population. Spaniards and the wealthiest Creoles alongside institutions such as the religious orders claimed ownership of much of the land. In line with the conventions of this historical field, the

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43 Dym, From Sovereign Villages, 266–71, gives extensive population statistics, including the percentage of different castas. Bernardo Belzunegui Ormázabal, Pensamiento económico y reforma agraria en el Reino de Guatemala, 1797–1812 (Guatemala: Comisión Interuniversitaria Guatemalteca de Conmemoración del Quinto Centenario del Descubrimiento de América, 1992), 269–72, gives statistics that seem accurate for Guatemala City, but probably underestimates the total number of inhabitants. The Consulado de Comercio estimated one million inhabitants in its 1811 Apuntamientos sobre Agricultura y Comercio.
adjective and noun ‘Indian’ is used when discussing people within the Spanish category of ‘indio’. This was a Spanish legal and social as well as racial construct within the colonial *casta* (caste) system, and cannot be uncritically translated with the modern ethnic term of indigenous or *indígena*. Eighteenth-century authors also used the term *naturales* to refer to the native inhabitants of specific places, often with the implication that these were indigenous people. An extensive literature on the construction of ethnic identity through clothing, racial ‘passing’, and ‘purchasing whiteness’ has greatly nuanced and complicated our understanding of these terms.\(^{44}\) In Central America, American-born persons of Spanish descent were often known as *ladino*, and only occasionally *criollo*. I use the English term Creole to translate both, since it is widely used in histories of Latin American science. Spaniards from Spain were known as *peninsulares* or *europeos*, although *español* could also be a *casta* term that encompassed both peninsulars and Creoles. Issues of translation also arise with Spanish terms such as *negro* or *esclavos negros*, free or enslaved persons supposedly entirely of African descent. While Indians featured prominently in the documents of enlightened reformers, there were few discussions of enslaved black labour in the Society’s ambit. While there were fewer enslaved blacks in Central America than in other Spanish colonies (probably because *hacienda* owners lacked funds, and had access to cheap Indian labour through the *repartimiento* system), a few *haciendas* including the Dominican order’s lucrative sugar plantation at San Gerónimo used enslaved labour, as did the British plantations along the Mosquito Coast and logging camps of Belize. Crown slaves were engaged in harbour-works at Omoa. In addition, there was a substantial free black population working in mines, as artisans, and in black militias.\(^{45}\) Other Spanish *casta* categories such as *mestizo*, *mulato*, *zambo*, and *pardo* are included in the text in italics.

Elite Spanish and Creole perspectives on landscapes were more likely to be recorded in archival documents, but they were inevitably also shaped by the Indian population who, as the majority of agricultural workers, knew the landscape best, and were more likely to reside in

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rural villages. Reformers often imagined that Indians could be ‘led’ and managed as if the labour force were just another natural resource, or alternatively paternalistically schemed to protect them from coercive labour practices. The ‘improvement’ that reformers imagined rested on an assumption that they would be able to direct and control the management of landscapes, but also by extension the bodies and work of rural and urban labourers, by directing certain harvests or road-building projects to be carried out, or instructing them how to process the results of a flax harvest, for instance. Even rural Indians, however, possessed significant agency within the life of the colony: they were much more likely than city scholars to have technical and practical knowledge of farming methods, local geographies, and plants, and voiced their opinion through informal protests, by exercising their rights within Spanish courts, or threatening legal action or petitioning authorities.

Intellectuals and statesmen may have been the most vocal proponents of these new patriotic ideas within political discourses, but the membership and debates of the Economic Society also show that a relatively broad public participated in these constructions of patriotic identities. They included landowners, low-ranking secular officials, and parish priests who might be considered ‘elite’ in the sense that they were Spanish or Creole literate men in a position of some power, but whose voices were amplified by the Economic Society’s fora more than in government archival records.

The opportunities for organising projects of improvement opened up by the Economic Society did not mean that officials suddenly pursued only this path for promoting their own plans to make the kingdom prosperous. After all, Enlightenment in Spanish America worked within the structures of government as often as without, and there was often congruence between the aims of the Bourbon Reforms and the Society’s regional goals. Many of the reformers’ concerns about useful nature in the 1790s were also already shared by colonial administrators in the 1780s. This meant that regional governors who featured in the pages of the Society’s newspaper also utilised the usual pathways of the colonial bureaucracy for their projects. They might promote a project as an individual initiative, yet assumed that the Guatemala City government would authorise a draft of Indian labour if it were needed. Nor did projects and reforms start or end with the Economic Society. In the 1780s and early 1790s, for instance, the Spanish official Antonio López Peñalver y Alcalá pursued a number of projects in the spirit of the Bourbon reforms through the

46 Elite reformers usually assumed that rural labourers were ‘Indian’ and recorded their identity this way.

47 On Indian agency through law, see also Brian Owensby, Empire of Law and Indian Justice in Colonial Mexico (Stanford University Press, 2008)
usual channels of government. He left for Spain in 1796, just before the heyday of the Economic Society. While in Renán Silva’s account of the New Granadan Enlightenment, intellectual ideas and the practice of government are usually distinguished, in Guatemala, the realms of enlightened enthusiasm and bureaucracy were not separate.

The roles of Society members and administrator were sometimes blurred. For instance, when Juan Ortiz de Letona was put in charge of a rare collection of plants, his position in the fiscal administration was evidently one of the reasons which gave him control over the plants which were seen as potentially economically useful. However, when he in turn handed the collection to a member of the Guatemala City administration, Juan Payés y Font, it was much more likely that he did so in acknowledgement of their mutual membership of the Economic Society. These institutional structures suggest that this Central American Enlightenment was less revolutionary than gradual, a successful insertion of some new modes of thinking into established social, intellectual, and political circles. Although significant figures emerged in its first director, the oidor Jacobo de Villaurrutia, and enthusiastic contributors Alejandro Ramírez, José Rossi y Rubí, and Juan Ortiz de Letona, the often decentralised pathways of creating and relaying a variety of knowledges that we can see in Central America defies interpretation as either an ‘interpretive community’ (after Stanley Fish) or an ‘intellectual field’ (after Pierre Bourdieu). Renán Silva and David Lindenfeld’s use of these terms to describe groups of reformers in New Granada and the German lands, respectively, suggests a more elite and scholarly context than the Guatemalan reformers’ actions. It may be best to imagine them as a loose network that only relied on Guatemala City as a Latourian ‘centre of calculation’ in some cases. Although many networks of correspondence and administrative power did converge on that city, Society members also emphasised their ability to take action in the countryside, and often highlighted practical actions over abstracted information. Smaller regional towns and rural projects of progress made these networks multi-sited, and employed a variety of intellectual and practical influences.

However, despite its less-than-monolithic nature, the Economic Society is

49 Silva, Los Ilustrados, 578. Afanador Llach, ‘Political Economy, Geographical Imagination and Territory’ is a better parallel here, although the bureaucrats she describes were not generally self-consciously pursuing ‘Enlightenment’.
51 Silva, Los Ilustrados, 584; Lindenfeld, Practical Imagination, 5.
a useful prism to trace Enlightenment ideas across the period. It formed a loose but distinct group whose members gravitated to the ideologies of enlightened reform, and improvement through learning and science, as well as making these ideas a matter of public debate.

Localist ideas of reform in the Americas have sometimes been described as ‘Creole patriotism’, but the precise category of ‘Creole’ in the sense of a person of Spanish origin born in the Americas is of limited use in the context of the Guatemalan Society’s members’ varied backgrounds. Central America-born Creoles, especially friars and clergy educated at institutions such as the University of San Carlos in Guatemala or seminaries in Comayagua and León certainly shaped the work of the Society. The scholar and reformer of Guatemala’s university curriculum, José Antonio Liendo y Goicoechea, was born in Costa Rica, to give just one example. However, many of the ‘enlightened elite’, from whose ranks the Society’s most prolific members were drawn, were originally from Spain or from other parts of the Spanish empire, including the first director of the Economic Society, Jacobo de Villaurrutia (born in Santo Domingo), and the Italian-born José Rossi y Rubí. Postings within the empire could generate new loyalties. Nobody could doubt the commitment of Alejandro Ramírez, co-founder of the Gazeta de Guatemala, to the Society’s project. Born in Spain, he stayed in Central America for two decades and married a local woman, but left in 1812, having been promoted to the post of superintendent of Puerto Rico. Jordana Dym has also made the argument that the Society’s newspaper formed a bridge between Spaniards and Creoles, and some residents of Central America certainly thought these debates of difference absurd. One anonymous writer by the pen-name of Guatemalafilo admonished European residents to ‘respect the Creoles’, reminding them that ‘your sons will tomorrow become part of this class which you now so disdain’. Others were openly ambivalent about their identity, like the priest who noted ‘I am a European; but I have lived more than 30 years of my life in this country... and I am not dissatisfied with the fate which has been given to me in this world.’

53 Silva, Los Ilustrados, 575–6, 646 also rejects this term for the Enlightenment in New Granada, pointing to its members’ varied origins, but does maintain pride in one’s regional origins as one of the group’s identifying features.


57 ‘Cartas del Cura de N.’, Gazeta, Vol. 1, no. 26 (31 July 1797), 205. Antonio Croquer y Muñoz of Nunalco (Santiago de Nonalco) is the likely candidate for this pseudonym.
The *patria* that reformers worked towards improving, then, need not have anything to do with place of birth. The ‘*patria*’ in the Economic Society’s title was defined as ‘Guatemala’, that is the Spanish Audiencia or Kingdom of Guatemala, but a ‘love of the *patria*’ did not refer only to Central American betterment. In imperial Spanish ideology, what was good for Spain was automatically considered beneficial to all colonies, too, and that local improvement in the Spanish territories would benefit the improvement of the whole empire. Governments in Madrid and Guatemala City, the Economic Society, and the Consulado were therefore all assumed to participate in the same rhetoric of reform for the sake of public utility and public happiness. This made it politically possible to pursue a local patriotic agenda that prioritised just one part of the wider empire, a situation that had parallels in local improvement initiatives in the context of other empires in eighteenth-century Hungary, Ireland, and Scotland.\(^\text{58}\) A more distinct localism also developed in the Kingdom of Guatemala. Several historians have suggested that this prepared the way for the construction of national identities during independence, but the links between such patriotism and later political ideas of a nation-state are tenuous.\(^\text{59}\) For instance, patriotism could also simultaneously exist at the scale of an allegiance to ‘American’ rather than ‘Guatemalan’ territory.\(^\text{60}\) While even long-term Spanish residents might have subscribed to localist sentiments in their reform activities, membership in the Economic Society did not necessarily signify emotional attachment to Central America, and certainly not the idea of a united Central America: the prolific contributor to the Guatemalan Economic Society Matías de Córdova was a signatory of the declaration of independence of Chiapas from Guatemala in 1823.\(^\text{61}\) As Jordana Dym has demonstrated, Central American states did not ‘emerge already formed from the process of independence’. Instead, political loyalties were divided between


municipality, state, and federation. Nation-states emerged along the lines of provincial divisions that had meant very little to colonial understandings of sovereignty.\(^{62}\)

Colonial-era patriotism was therefore not geared towards independence, but nor was it territorially easily defined. For instance, as with reformers elsewhere in Spanish America, emotional language was often tied to descriptions of physical terrain and soils in a patriotic sentiment that might be linked to national territory, but the ‘local’ in Central America that reformers might show allegiance to was fragmented. ‘Guatemala’ as the capital and its surrounding provinces was a conceptual category for the Economic Society, but other provinces within Central America were less clearly defined, reflecting a fractured political and economic landscape. There were some important instances in the Economic Society’s project that did hint at a growing spatialised view of an area or the Audiencia as a whole as a patriotic, economic, and geographical unit. In addition, specific locations could now be added to the catalogue of places that were being transformed by enlightened interventions. The construction of such geographies had many layers of meaning. The idea of landscapes embodying their future promise in archival evidence about their history, for instance, appears in many case studies in this book. Although these geographies did not configure nation-states per se, there were increasingly some territorial-patriotic spaces that post-independence reformers would be able to fill with new meanings. The case studies in this book show that whether defined as patria, país, estas tierras, estos payses, or simply ‘Guatemala’ (as in the case of the anonymous author Guatemalofilo), members of the Society chose a place within, or version of, this homeland as their target when they contributed suggestions, projects, or practical actions to its work.

If the later recasting of patriotic identities as national had to rest on concepts of ‘profound emotional legitimacy’, to use Benedict Anderson’s term, it was not necessarily a geographical definition of homeland as much as enlightened actions which defined the patriot, a belief in the material consequences of interventions in the cultural landscape rather than ‘Central America’.\(^{63}\) While education and incentives might create ‘useful’ citizens or subjects, patriotism as a voluntary act deserved the highest praise. In Central America, emotive language was associated with the act of attempting to apply Enlightenment. Director of the Economic Society Jacobo de Villaurrutia, expressed these sentiments particularly clearly when he explained that he was ‘talking from his heart’ about the necessity of being a patriot and lauded the ‘very fertile land’ as well as knowledge of ‘our soils, our climes’.\(^{64}\) However, these ideas of

\(^{62}\) Dym, From Sovereign Villages, quote from p. 5.


\(^{64}\) Real Sociedad, Quinta junta pública, 2–4.
patriotism and Enlightenment were rooted in the ideas of taking specific practical action. Elisa Martín-Valdepeñas Yagüe has highlighted a similar connection between patriotism as the efforts and enlightened actions for the case of the Madrid Economic Society’s members, commenting also on the vaguely defined political space in which the Spanish patriots acted. A patriot of the eighteenth century, as Gabriel Entin also explains, was expected to be selfless, pursue utility or progress for the public good, keywords that appear frequently in the Economic Society’s works. The Director of the Economic Society Villaurrutia himself contrasted action with words, which were of moderate use, since ‘a patriot cannot be excited by speeches’. One reformer was praised for his actividad, his willingness to take action, another for his ‘active dedication [zelo activo]’, while yet another was lauded for the ‘patriotic eagerness of his dedication’ relating specifically to the flax harvest. I argue that this sense of embodied patriotism as defined by action is visible throughout the period. A Guatemalan patriotic space therefore emerged at the intersection of the political-economic logic that sought to create wealth from nature, specific interventions in the landscape that reformers believed to represent progress, and clearly defined localist epistemologies that reformers chose as practical rather than ideological solutions to problems of knowledge.

There were instances, even in generally Crown-loyal Central America, where local improvers were at odds with the Madrid government. Despite a general political and social congruence between elites on the two sides of the Atlantic, elites in the Americas generally conceived of the empire as a looser construct of composite monarchies, not colonies in the classical sense. In the Economic Society’s work, we can see the publication of a handful of political articles that may have raised suspicion in Madrid, as well as disagreements and perhaps misunderstandings leading to the suppression of the Society. The Economic Society was suspended indefinitely by a royal decree of November 1799, which took effect when it reached Guatemala in May 1800, and not re-established until 1811, although its newspaper continued to be published. No precise explanation was given for its suppression, but the Gazeta had previously published a number of articles that may have rankled Crown authorities: a series of articles that flattered the

68 Gazeta, Vol. 1, no. 14 (15 May 1797), 111; Real Sociedad, Quinta junta, 8; ‘Junta extraordinaria’ 88, 24 October 1799, HSA, HC 418/563.
governments of Russia and Sweden, rather than Spain; extracts of Francisco de Clavijero’s censored work *Storia Antica de Messico*; and an essay critical of Spanish economic policy.\(^{70}\) The paper’s first editor, Alejandro Ramírez y Blanco, made some influential enemies, for instance by promoting the cause of the liberalisation of trade.\(^{71}\) Another editor, Simon Bergaño y Villegas, wrote articles against ecclesiastical power and in favour of teaching in the vernacular instead of Latin in the *Gazeta de Guatemala*, which brought him into trouble with a conservative archbishop, and penned an article advocating drastic reforms of the colonial system. In 1808, he was accused of inciting an uprising of artisans, as well as showing disloyalty towards the king. After this, he was jailed in Spain for two years, although he was later freed and allowed to return to America, founding several newspapers in Havana.\(^{72}\) The clashes between the *Gazeta* and Madrid, though on the whole they were far from suggesting any revolutionary political attitudes, allow us to conceive of there being some intellectual distance between enlightened reformers in Guatemala and Spain. Useful knowledge and economic improvement were not always interpreted in the same way on both sides of the Atlantic.\(^{73}\)

Even during the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1808, Guatemalan officials generally remained Crown-loyal. Guatemala was quick to declare its loyalty to the deposed king in 1808, and any separatist movement was largely suppressed after 1811 by the new captain-general, José Bustamante y Guerra, who also did his best to slow down the implementation of the 1812 Cádiz Constitution. The restoration of King Ferdinand VII to the Spanish throne in 1814 largely silenced the liberal faction, and Spanish rule appeared firmly re-established. Nevertheless, the Napoleonic invasion had led many across Spanish America to question the colonies’ relationship to Spain and the monarchy. In Guatemala, this was also a period when new political ideas and groups were formed which, especially in Guatemala City, were discontented with the status quo. Across Central America, between 1811 and 1820, old grievances were exacerbated in disagreements between representatives of the provinces and Guatemala City,


with Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, and Salvadoreans protesting about being disadvantaged economically and treated unfairly in matters of taxation, sowing some of the seeds for the political debates of the independence period. Audiencia President Antonio Gonzáles Mollinedo now also used the relative power vacuum of the Cádiz Cortes to re-establish the Society in 1811. Arguing that nobody could deny the Society’s utility and that it was only intended to be suspended, not abolished, in the first place, he claimed that Ferdinand VII would surely approve it if given the chance. Yet again, while this did not show the Society as a subversive entity, it demonstrated its appeal to governance and projects of progress designed from within Central America.

On a day-to-day basis, enlightened reformers in the late eighteenth century found far more pressing matters to occupy their minds than plotting revolution. The memory of the destruction of the old capital city Santiago in 1773 and construction of the new city of Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción loomed large in the capital’s recent memory. By the 1790s, the process of constructing the new city had barely been completed. Several of the men who supported the creation of an Economic Society did so with explicit reference to the destruction wrought by earthquakes: President José Domás y Valle thought that an Economic Society would be useful, because ‘twenty years on from the move [of the capital], nobody has yet taken the first step in sorting out some fundamental problems of political economy.’ He referred to the regulation of trades in particular, but it is also clear that Guatemala, to him, was a project in progress. Another essay asking for the establishment of the Society pointed out that the move of the capital after the 1773 earthquake meant that they needed knowledge (facultades) now ‘more than ever’, but the author saw a disappointing lack of it in the population. Beyond that, Guatemala had its share of economic and social challenges in this period. They were not uniform: the local and regional nature of much commerce meant that local economies, such as Quetzaltenango’s textile industry in the late eighteenth century, were sometimes unscathed by larger trends. However, a general local perception of deterioration of economic and societal circumstances chimed in with a broader

74 Shafer, Economic Societies, 224.
76 ‘Presidente de Guatemala sobre establecer una Sociedad Económica’, 1795. AGI, Estado, 48, N.7, 5v.
77 ‘Discurso sobre las utilidades que puede producir una Sociedad Económica en Guatemala’, 1795. AGI, Estado, 48, N.7, 1v.
narrative of decline across the empire.\textsuperscript{79} In addition, the smallpox epidemics of 1780–1 and 1794–6 and the typhus epidemics throughout the period constituted a humanitarian crisis (and provoked a comprehensive smallpox vaccination campaign, which was led and supported by key Economic Society members).\textsuperscript{80} They disrupted what was already perceived as a decline in agriculture and trade. Falling prices for indigo (Central America’s main export in the eighteenth century) on the world market and wars with Britain that interrupted most legal transatlantic trade contributed to an economic depression in parts of the kingdom.\textsuperscript{81} Locust plagues that affected the entire region in the 1770s and again between 1798 and 1805 further slowed agricultural production, while in 1796 the important cattle industry was affected by a mysterious epidemic that killed thousands of cows.\textsuperscript{82} Central America’s enlightened reformers were determined to find solutions to some of these problems and turn the narrative of decline into prosperity. Enlightenment action represented a fitting response to urgent problems.

\textbf{Sources and Chapter Outline}

The events of this book cover the period between 1784 (when the government in Guatemala City started investigating a set of ruins found near the Chiapas hamlet of Palenque, and the year that archbishop Francos y Monroy concluded a visit of Guatemala by recommending that an Economic Society for its improvement be established), and 1838 (when the federal republic of independent Central American states fell apart). Most case studies come from the years in which the Economic Society’s schemes were most pronounced: between 1796 and 1806, with another flurry of activity in the 1810s. In the wake of independence from Spain in 1821, Central American states banded together in a federation known as the ‘United Provinces of Central America’. Only the last chapter of the book covers the period of 1821 to 1838, a time in which the legacy of the colonial-era reformism became clear. This is not a political history of Central America’s independence processes, but the last chapter demonstrates the surprising resilience of the colonial era’s geographical imagination and information networks through changed political circumstances. The criteria for useful and practical knowledge established by the Economic Society had led to a reconsideration of the meaning and potential of Central American


\textsuperscript{80} Martha Few, \textit{For All of Humanity}.


agricultural, commercial, and environmental geographies, leaving a lasting impact on the construction of Central America’s new nations and their dealings with other states.

This study relies on manuscript and printed sources from archives in Guatemala, Spain, Britain, and the United States, particularly from the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, the Archivo General de Centroamérica in Guatemala City, and a small but notable collection of Economic Society papers, long disappeared from the view of historians, from the Hispanic Society of America in New York. The authors of these documents were members of the Economic Society, the Consulado de Comercio, priests, engineers, and officials of the Crown, but also recorded the voices of other actors including Indian farmers or villagers. Official manuscript reports, private correspondence, printed treatises, and pamphlets reveal some of the communication pathways that formed the basis of the acquisition of Central American scientific knowledge. The correspondence archive of the Economic Society, partially preserved in the Archivo General de Centroamérica, and articles printed in its newspaper, the Gazeta de Guatemala (1797–1808), allow for an analysis of the correspondence networks that formed the basis of scientific enquiries in Central America. Sources that are broadly geographical, agricultural, or natural-historical, from instructions for growing plants to road surveys, carry particular weight, since they often contain subjective and experiential accounts of encounters with the landscape. City and rural government officials’ reports in turn reflect how questions of day-to-day governance were influenced by perceptions of geography and landscape.

Chapter 1 shows the varied ways in which colonial administrative traditions approached the study of landscape. Through the case study of the discovery of Maya ruins near Palenque in Chiapas in the 1780s, it examines the way officials and scholars within the Guatemala City government understood and recorded information about man-made and natural landscapes. It argues that concerns about Central American environments, including the threat of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, informed the explorations of this site, illuminating the extent to which concerns about natural factors influenced day-to-day understandings of landscapes and the practice of governance in Central America. These practices in turn established powerful models for the work of later reformers. The methodologies of information-gathering and the debates about the site also highlighted the idea of economic improvement through harnessing existing natural resources. This was central to the economic thought

83 On the latter, see Wendy Kramer, George Lovell, and Christopher Lutz. ‘Pillage in the Archives: The Whereabouts of Guatemalan Documentary Treasures’, Latin American Research Review 48, no. 3 (2013): 153–67. Early papers of the Economic Society are part of the Hiersemann collection this article refers to, alongside documents such as draft maps for bishop Cortés y Larraz’s Visita, which will be edited and published by George Lovell.
of the Bourbon reforms, which was clearly widespread across Guatemala at this time. Officials, engineers, and scholars ‘read’ from the landscape: Palenque’s landscapes were seen throughout the period as key to questions of its past glory and future potential.

Chapter 2 contrasts these relatively rigid pathways of bureaucratic information-gathering with the novel pathways of communication that the newly founded Economic Society provided. It demonstrates how the Society built up a network of information exchange through correspondence as well as the publication of a newspaper, the Gazeta de Guatemala. These networks were designed to extend the reach of the Society from urban contexts into rural ones and had an active purpose: members and their associates were exhorted to grow, collect, and harvest economically useful plants. Reports from members over two decades show that, on a small scale at least, this succeeded, leading to an exchange of useful plant material. The varied social position and geographical locations of the newspaper’s subscribers also made its pages an exceptional forum for debate, creating a nascent ‘public sphere’. The networks even extended beyond the Audiencia’s borders, placing Central America in a context of global economic botany and scholarship. One manifestation of the extension of the Society’s practical network was that a member imported a collection of ‘exotic’ plants and seeds from Sumatra and Jamaica, plants which were then grown and harvested in Central America with some success.

Chapter 3 explores the promises and contradictions inherent in the information drawn from these local and global knowledge networks. There were tensions that were never quite resolved between the production of locally relevant knowledge that rejected theoretical approaches and a global intellectual movement that praised universal knowledge. The Economic Society responded to this by carefully negotiating the sources of knowledge which it received from its networks, especially on the topics of natural history and medical botany, and building up its own epistemologies and definitions of practical Enlightenment that made the local applicability of any information the ultimate test of its value. Frameworks of knowledge with universal aspirations, such as Linnaean taxonomy, were not welcome when local descriptions would be more translateable within Central America. I argue that these stubbornly local conceptualisations of knowledge became problematic when a comparison with other places was required, for instance in the context of attempting to export plants from Guatemala to other places, and in debating the merits of plantain trees with scholars in other parts of the empire.

Chapter 4 shows that tensions about the applicability of knowledge were never more pronounced than when it came to geographical information. The Gazeta newspaper used its networks of knowledge to attempt to create a new ‘Description of Guatemala’ that would not just counter erroneous claims about
the Americas peddled by some European philosophers, but also critically examined existing sources and formats of geographical knowledge. They rejected geography as a universal science that related places across the globe to each other, and instead prioritised information from current statistics as well as local historical archives. Individual reformers also contributed even more practical geographies that reported their own experience of travel. Geography and chorography were considered useful only in so far as it would help to increase trade and prosperity. It followed that securing transport connections through road- and harbour works that would allow for an exploitation of natural wealth was the most important application of such knowledge. Reformers attempted to rewrite the geography of the Audiencia’s trade routes, and thought of their projects as integrating specific places more firmly into the geography of the region.

Chapter 5 argues that preoccupation with travel, topography, and geography merely formed the basis for even more ambitious projects that did, however, show the limits of what practical patriotism might achieve. When combined with a providential belief in the potential of the land, the application of geographical and botanical knowledge to the countryside meant that spaces which had hitherto been considered ‘empty’ or ‘wild’ could be filled with new meaning. Reformers were concerned with the role of people (Indians, but also Europeans, Africans, and Caribbeans of African descent, as well as enslaved people) in managing landscapes. They increasingly discussed questions of what we might call ‘biopower’ after Foucault, conceiving of labour and the management of the population as a resource. In this, reformers paid particular attention to the possibility that humans might influence environments in more profound ways than just by building roads. They hoped that human errors that had made Caribbean environments ‘unhealthy’ in the past could be reversed by building better-ventilated settlements, or regulating military barracks to help soldiers behave like agricultural settlers and make this land productive.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that projects for managing the natural world established in the colonial period enjoyed continued relevance after independence from Spain in 1821, as the new states of the federal republic of Central America embarked on renewed efforts to study nature. Focusing on the case study of Guatemala, the new republic maintained ‘useful patriotism’ as an ideal of citizenship and re-established colonial institutions such as the Economic Society. New transcontinental networks of scientific knowledge, centred on London now in parallel to Guatemala City, expanded the scientific worlds of Guatemalans and resident foreigners in a dramatically different geopolitical context. Despite the economic importance of Britain in Central America at this time, and despite the often negative opinions that British scientists and governments expressed of Spanish American (colonial and independent) knowledge,
British investors and geographers were heavily reliant not just on the new maps of the independent state, but colonial geographical material from Spanish archives too. Colonial-era reform projects, often through a material legacy of plans in an archive, had laid the groundwork for imagining a Central America built on idea of useful knowledge, patriotic dedication, and connected scientific networks around the world.