

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Political Modernity in Latin America: The Nineteenth Century

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This essay reviews the following works:

Authoritarian El Salvador: Politics and the Origins of the Military Regimes, 1880–1940. By Erik Ching. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 496. \$55.00 paper. ISBN: 9780268023751.

The Rise of Constitutional Government in the Iberian Atlantic World: The Impact of the Cádiz Constitution of 1812. Edited by Scott Eastman and Natalia Sobrevilla Perea. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015. Pp. vii + 320. \$64.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780817318567.

Armies, Politics, and Revolution: Chile, 1808–1826. By Juan Luis Ossa Santa Cruz. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 288. £75.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781781381328.

The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America. By James E. Sanders. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 352. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9780822357803.

In the past twenty-five years, interpretations of the nineteenth-century history of Latin America have changed radically. Until the 1980s, patriotic historiography and structuralism dominated research on nineteenth-century history, even if some historians produced works outside of either tradition.¹ Patriotic historiography dated the nineteenth century as the start of a heroic national history. According to this view, patriotic men liberated their countries from Spanish colonialism and tried to better the life of their people by forging modern nation-states. In contrast, structuralist research focused on the continuities and dependencies of Latin America. It emphasizes social and economic structures, and how international trading patterns did not fundamentally change after independence. But only in the last two decades of the twentieth century did patriotic histories and structuralist approaches give way to new ways of understanding the politics of the past. Historians no longer study the power of great men or of anonymous socioeconomic structures. Instead, they focus on the role of ordinary people, epistemological power, contingencies, and agencies of a great number of decision makers.

As both patriotic and structuralist historiographies had “forgotten”² political history in the proper sense, from the 1990s on, political history on nineteenth-century Latin America began a boom phase that lasts until today. What was new in the “new political history”³ First, it researches the political realm. It neither

¹ For patriotic historiography of Peru, see, for example, Carlos Daniel Valcárcel et al., *Historia general de los peruanos*, vol. 3, *El Perú: Primera y segunda independencia, 1821–y 1968*, 2nd ed. (Lima: Iberia, 1972). For a structuralist view, see Heraclio Bonilla, “Clases populares y Estado en el contexto de la crisis colonial,” in *La independencia en el Perú*, ed. Heraclio Bonilla et al., 13–69 (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1972). Different interpretations from the 1970s include Jorge Basadre, *El azar en la historia y sus límites* (Lima: P. L. Villanueva, 1973); Alberto Flores Galindo, *Arequipa y el sur andino* (Lima: Horizonte, 1977).

² François-Xavier Guerra, “El olvidado siglo XIX,” in *Balance de la historiografía sobre Iberoamérica (1945–1988): Actas de las IV Conversaciones Internacionales de Historia: Universidad de Navarra*, 593–631 (Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 1989), 63.

³ *Ensayos sobre la “nueva” historia política de América Latina, siglo XIX*, ed. Guillermo Palacios (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2007).

explains the political with reference to economic and social structures nor with respect to the patriotism of great men. Behind political history was and still is the idea that the political constitutes an area of its own as important as, for example, the economy or culture.

Although this version of political history is similar to that practiced in Europe or the United States, the new Latin American political history is peculiar in a number of aspects. First of all, it is very idealistic. Most of the best studies are about ideas, mentalities, concepts, and imaginations. They are about the way people thought about the political. Therefore, more often than not, they analyze printed texts that express opinions or important laws, especially constitutional ones. However, new political history is not much interested in the state and its institutions. Today we know more about the way people imagined the state than about the way Latin American states worked in the nineteenth century. There are some exceptions, for example, electoral history, but as a rule we can say that few historians study political institutions such as, for example, political parties.⁴ Instead of the state and institutions, a great number of political actors came into the focus of political history. Whereas intellectual history was formerly the history of the elite, now historians analyze the political ideas of all social and cultural groups, including indigenous people, slaves and freedmen, the urban poor, and women. As a result, political historians stopped underscoring the ways that Latin American political systems fell short of European and US models. Instead, they investigate proper Latin American political histories.

This leads to the second point: The focus on ideas and imagination has replaced power and interest from the center of the political. Constituting the political as an area in its own right means that many historians do not emphasize the importance of uncovering the social and economic interests of political action. Besides, most historians do not focus on conflicts over power, but concentrate on the way people imagined and described their struggles.

Finally, the new political history has introduced new ways of conceiving of the space of Latin American history. Should we focus on the local communities, on the nation-states, on an Iberian Atlantic, or a wider Euro–American Atlantic; on the West, or on a South that includes sub-Saharan Africa? While most of the old political history viewed the nation as the natural place of the political, the little importance given to the state today has led to a spatial turn that helps us to rethink Latin America's nineteenth century. The four books reviewed in this essay address these questions of the new political history in one way or another. They show how political history contributes to a better understanding of Latin America's past and present.

War and Independence

Old historiography described the independence wars as a fight of Latin American nations against despotic European government. The new historiography analyzes the disintegration of the Spanish monarchy and the undermining of Portuguese royal power due to the French invasion of the Spanish peninsula. According to this view, independence wars were civil wars between defenders of the old regime and advocates of independence or, at least, autonomy.

In *Armies, Politics, and Revolution*, Juan Luis Ossa Santa Cruz examines the impact warfare had on political modernity in Chile between 1808 and 1826. Obviously, armies in Chile were small. There were no *nations in arms* as in revolutionary France, for example. However, Ossa Santa Cruz argues “that the revolutionary war was a prolonged experience that—for good or bad—had permanent effects on Chilean society” (5). The book describes in detail the different armies in wars that led to Chilean independence. It starts with the disputes over how to respond to the 1808 French invasion of Spain and the beginning of revolutionary warfare in Chile. It analyzes both royal forces and the Army of the Andes, which finally won the war and established—in the words of Ossa Santa Cruz—a military regime in Chile.

Armies, Politics, and Revolution underscores the importance of the wars in the south of Chile as they contributed to the militarization of political conflict. Final chapters discuss the expedition to Peru and the beginning of the Chilean republic. According to Ossa Santa Cruz, militarization of political conflict led to radicalization. Military campaigns had the objective of annihilating political opponents. Therefore, one can infer, political actors found it more difficult to negotiate and to compromise. Additionally, political legitimacy and military force became strongly dependent. Ossa Santa Cruz's book uses primary sources from a great number of archives in Chile, Peru, Argentina, Spain, and Great Britain. It shows the peculiar relation of armies and warfare, on the one side, and the political realm on the other. The role armies and warfare

⁴ *Historia de las elecciones en Iberoamérica, siglo XX*, ed. Antonio Annino (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica de Argentina, 1995); *Elections before Democracy: The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America*, ed. Eduardo Posada-Carbó (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

played was completely different from their roles in many European countries. However, it was also different from the United States and from Brazil, to give just two American examples. Ossa Santa Cruz concentrates on independence and the 1820s. It would be interesting to understand to what extent the military beginnings of Chilean independent history had long-lasting consequences for the political realm.

Patronage and the Military

Focusing on the years between 1880 and 1940, Erik Ching in *Authoritarian El Salvador* argues that “El Salvador’s political system exhibited a marked degree of continuity” between the mid-nineteenth and the last decades of the twentieth century (336). The system came into being after the dissolution of the Central American Federal Republic in the mid-nineteenth century. The landowning elites controlled the political sphere on a local level through patronage and clientelism. They were able to hold elections because they manipulated voters and elections. When the coffee boom started in the last decades of the nineteenth century, central government became more important as it profited from coffee revenues. With a modernized army, it could intervene in local disputes between clientele networks and suppress urban and rural subaltern movements. In this way, the coffee elite and the military were able to maintain a fictitious democracy, which was only interrupted by military dictatorship when their alliance became unstable or popular demands threatened the established order. However, Ching argues that for a long time “the poor bargained, negotiated, and inserted their interests into the system.” Nevertheless, they were not able to build “a mass-based civic republicanism” (339, both citations). Only from the mid-twentieth century onward military leaders began to consider reforms of the economic and social system. The resulting disunion between the coffee elite and a sector of the military was one reason why El Salvador experienced violent political conflicts in the last decades of the twentieth century. These conflicts were different from, for example, the brutally repressed 1932 rebellion, because they expressed divisions within the national elite and not only between the elite and subaltern groups.

Primary sources of Ching’s book are not only from archives in El Salvador but also from Russia, Great Britain, and the United States. Ching substantiates his analysis with extensive references to manuscripts and printed documents. His book is a superbly researched study that includes an array of political areas, as, for example, prosopography, political discourse, electoral practice, state building, and network analysis. It shows how complex political history is. He concludes that we have to “place contingency at the forefront of our analysis” (344). This is the opposite of a structuralist understanding of political history. It underlines the role of people’s decisions in history without denying the importance of the state and other institutions.

The Cádiz Constitution

The Cádiz Constitution of 1812 was the first modern constitution of Spain. The Spanish parliament enacted the constitution at a moment when France had occupied most of the country. However, the French did not manage to conquer Cádiz, a city protected by its geographic position and the British navy. Since most of Spain’s elite did not accept the abdication of the Spanish king, they searched for a way to create a legitimate representation of the Spanish monarchy. Their quest resulted in the first modern national assembly of Spain and Spanish America in 1810. The so-called Cortes assembled until 1814, when the new Spanish king dissolved the parliament and abolished the constitution. The Cádiz Constitution was again in force between 1820 and 1823 and for a few months between 1836 and 1837. Despite the short time the constitution was in effect, many historians see it as one of the most influential texts of nineteenth-century political history of Spain and Spanish America. *The Rise of Constitutional Government in the Iberian Atlantic World*, edited by Scott Eastman and Natalia Sobrevilla Perea, assembles eleven studies on the impact of the Cádiz Constitution in the Iberian Atlantic world.

This essay cannot discuss all eleven studies separately. I hope that the texts I am going to discuss will show that the book of Eastman and Sobrevilla Perea assembles a great number of important new insights into the long life of the Cádiz Constitution. The book starts with an essay of Brian Hamnett entitled “The Medieval Roots of Spanish Constitutionalism.” In fact, Hamnett explains that the Cádiz Constitution should be placed in Spanish and Spanish American debates about constitutionalism and representation. Spain’s imagined medieval past was important for antiabsolutist men who did not want to centralize power either with the king or with parliament. They preferred to reinforce cities, provinces, and reigns on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Hamnett, the Cádiz Constitution was not as new as many historians think: it was the heir of eighteenth-century political thought of absolutism. However, as it wished to replace the king by the parliament, it encountered fierce opposition from the king.

Roberto Breña highlights the revisionism that François-Xavier Guerra introduced into the studies of Hispanic American independencies. Before Guerra, research was much more concentrated in national histories and military aspects of independence. Today, most historians see Spanish American independence as a part of an Iberian revolution that started with the French invasion of the peninsula. In the words of Breña, the “main author responsible for this evolution was François-Xavier Guerra” (45). However, Breña is skeptical about Atlantic or global history approaches, doubting that the “discourse of the ‘Age of Revolution’ that goes from Philadelphia to Angostura via Paris and Cádiz” will help to better our understanding of the Spanish American revolutions in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (58).

The Cádiz Constitution did not mention slavery or the slave trade. It was a modern constitution regarding citizenship, voting, and the separation of power, but it did not better the status of Americans of African descent. It excluded even free Afro-Americans from citizenship. Therefore, Afro-Americans should have been opposed to the constitution. However, Marcela Echeverri shows in her contribution that a number of free and unfree Afro-Americans did use the constitution’s provision that Afro-Americans could become citizens as reward for merits in defending the new order. Therefore, Afro-Americans could negotiate their support for constitutional factions asking for citizenship in return for alliance with the constitutionalists. In a different way, Rafael Marquese and Tâmis Parron analyze the constitution’s effect on slavery, comparing the Cádiz Constitution with the Brazilian constitution of 1824. Brazilian slavery survived under the 1824 constitution until 1888, while most independent Spanish American nations had abolished slavery by the 1850s. Marquese and Parron argue that one reason for this difference was that Brazil’s constitution gave citizenship rights to free Afro-Brazilians. Therefore, elite Brazilians and even nonelite Brazilians did not see slavery as a menace to civilized society. On the contrary, they imagined slavery as an institution that helped Africans and Afro-Brazilians to become civilized. At the same time, citizenship separated free Afro-Brazilians from slaves, preventing a popular movement of free and unfree Afro-Brazilians.

Whereas indigenous people and slavery are topics discussed both in the Cádiz Cortes and in historical research, women’s rights are conspicuous by their absence. Reuben Zahler asks in his contribution if the constitution somehow affected the history of women’s rights. Although debates on the constitution and the constitution itself did not further women’s rights, Zahler argues that they formed part of cultural and political changes which, in the long run, improved the legal and real status of women. Obviously, it is difficult to link constitutional history directly to the history of gender in the Iberian world. However, gender is an important category of historical analysis we should have in mind when discussing the political history of the nineteenth century.

American Republican Modernity

In *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World*, James E. Sanders analyzes what he calls “American republican modernity.” According to Sanders, in nineteenth-century Latin America a “counter mentalité” imagined modernity to be located in the Americas and not in Europe. This concept of modernity was different from subsequent European concepts as it did not focus on technology and industrial production but on political issues, first of all republicanism and democracy. This kind of modernity defended popular politics, democracy, and the rights of the poor. Therefore, a great number of rural and urban poor people defended republicanism and imagined America to be the vanguard of the Atlantic world. Sanders’s book is a real Spanish American history as he assembles stories and discourses from a large number of Spanish American countries, including archival material from Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, and the United States. The book focuses on the decades between the 1840s and the 1870s, arguing that these years were the peak of American republican modernity.

Sanders’s argument goes beyond the description of a Latin American popular discourse. He wants to rewrite an important chapter of modern history. According to Sanders, most historians believe Europe and the United States to be the origin of modernity. Modernity began with the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and spread over the world due to industrialization and colonialism. Democracy, liberty, and equality are, in this view, the results of European and US political innovations. Sanders opposes this view. He argues that Europe suffered from reaction and monarchical rule in the middle of the nineteenth century. According to Sanders, at the same time, Latin America’s popular classes embraced republicanism and transformed it into a tool to further their rights. While they were quite successful in the years between 1840 and 1870, in the last decades of the nineteenth century European and US-American industrialization replaced Latin Americans’ popular discourse on modernity with a concept of modernity according to which modernity was to be found only in Europe and the United States. This is the main reason why public opinion and scholarly research have not given much attention to Latin American ways of modernity. However, Sanders thinks that

American republican modernity is important to Europe and the world because in the years of European monarchical hegemony, popular classes in Latin America kept alive a democratic tradition inherited from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. According to Sanders, in the nineteenth century, many Europeans admitted that modernity's place and future was in Latin America. Therefore, Latin America, or more precisely, Latin American popular classes were the vanguard of the Atlantic world.

Concluding Remarks

The four books discussed in this essay describe Latin American political modernities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They show that Latin American political history is much more Latin American than it was thirty years ago. All describe specific Latin American histories. They do not measure Latin American history with regard to a European model. Hopefully, this kind of research will make Latin American history even more Latin American in the years to come.

What does political modernity mean in Latin America? As Sanders observes, it is not helpful to imagine modernity as “something real,” that is to say, material. According to Sanders, “modernity does not exist as anything measurable, but is only a normative and judgmental comparison” (15–16). One might add that modernity is a normative description of one's own present, distancing it from the past and from the present of others. Modernity implies that one's own present is better than one's own past and the past and present of other people and world areas. Modernity is a narrative that explains why Europe and the United States have the right to rule the world. This narrative contains the idealistic statement that from the eighteenth century on, Europeans and US-Americans started to fight for freedom, equality, and democracy. Some critics of this narrative hold that Europeans and US-Americans betrayed these ideas. They argue that the ideas are good but their European and North American defenders bad or, at any rate, hypocritical. I would prefer a more critical stance toward central aspects of modernity. We should not see it in a Manichean way. Modernity included the old and the new, bondage and freedom, at the same time. These were not opposed concepts but interdependent ideas.⁵

Sanders argues that “American republican modernity” was also important for Europe. He suggests that some Europeans admired this kind of modernity and believed it to be a model for Europe. “American republican modernity” was important for Europe because it kept alive Enlightenment ideas that might have disappeared in the decades of monarchical dominance in Europe.

But Breña is critical of this way of writing transnational history. He argues that it is not too difficult to find references to ideas or realities in other world areas. This, however, does not mean these ideas or realities were important to local developments. In nineteenth-century Europe, Eurocentrism was dominant on the left and right and in the upper and lower classes. In his pathbreaking study of Latin American life in Paris during the Third French Republic, Jens Streckert shows that Latin Americans were troubled by the French people's lack of interest in all matters Latin American.⁶ Most Europeans could not even distinguish Latin American nation-states. They did not have the slightest idea of political realities overseas. Besides, in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, republicanism was not dead. In Germany alone, four independent republican cities existed (Bremen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Lübeck). Marx and Engels were quite right when in 1848 they wrote, “A specter is haunting Europe.” This specter had not migrated from Latin America. It was the descendant of European ancestors.

Besides differences regarding the impact of Latin American political thought in Europe, there is a debate about the location of Latin American history. The nation-state is no longer the natural container of history. Eastman and Sobrevilla Perea analyze the Iberian Atlantic, Sanders explores Latin America, and Ossa Santa Cruz examines an area that includes Argentina, Peru, and Chile. At first glance, Ching seems to prefer a national approach for his history of El Salvador. However, he combines different spatial perspectives that go from the local to the national in explaining how far a national history depends on local realities. In another way, Sanders writes a Latin American history. The stories he tells are similar but rarely connected. He shows the existence of “American republican modernity” by putting together a number of cases in different moments and different countries. This is a kind of comparative history where we find differences and similarities.

⁵ Cf. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Jens Streckert, *Die Hauptstadt Lateinamerikas: Eine Geschichte der Lateinamerikaner im Paris der Dritten Republik, 1870–1940* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013).

The four books reviewed in this essay highlight the importance of century-long traditions in Latin America. Brian Hamnett examines the eighteenth century to explain early Spanish constitutional thought. Ossa Santa Cruz focuses on the break independence meant regarding military history. He explains that during colonial times, the army was not an important political actor. This changed in the wars of independence and, therefore, the first chapter starts in 1808. Additionally, Haiti's revolution at the end of the century deserves mention when it comes to slavery in Cuba, Brazil, and other countries. The political histories discussed in this essay are inter alia about military actors, the public sphere, subaltern people, and local communities. Ching, for example, shows how long it took to build a strong national state in El Salvador. The weakness of the state was a legacy of colonial regimes administered by local elites. Whereas early colonial history has studied the demographic collapse of the native people during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the historiography of the nineteenth century does not give much attention to the fact that the population had still not recovered from the dramatic impact of European diseases. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, all Latin American countries were overwhelmingly rural. Excepting mining and sugar, protocapitalist production was only in its beginnings, because internal markets were small. Mountains and climatic conditions unknown to Europe made it difficult to connect political centers with remote regions. Under these conditions, subaltern people and rural communities were in a better position to impose their ideas of society on a local level. While Ching gives much attention to political institutions and local conditions, the books of Sanders, Ossa Santa Cruz, and Eastman and Sobrevilla Perea are more interested in political ideas, imagination, and discourses. Possibly, these differences express the different ways historians think about Latin American political histories of the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries. Ching gives much attention to the twentieth century; the other books focus on nineteenth century history. Given that a modern historiography of the political realm of nineteenth-century Latin America only came into being a few decades ago, the number and quality of today's studies is surprising. As we are living in the decades of bicentennial celebrations, there is no doubt that this research boom will last for some more years.

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