

## Book Reviews

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ROJAS, Rolando, 2017, *La república imaginada. Representaciones culturales y discursos políticos en la época de la Independencia*, Lima, Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2017. 156 pp.

The goal of this book is to illustrate how the sectors that confronted each other during the Peruvian independence process imagined the nascent republic, and how they proposed to incorporate popular sectors into the common exercise of political rights. As the author points out in the introduction, the point is to try to understand how Indians and common people in urban areas were to become “members of the national community in accordance with the cultural and political patterns of the nascent European bourgeoisie”<sup>1</sup> (p. 13). Rojas suggests that it was during these first years that the bases for the criollo-liberal manner of thinking about the nation (which continued to predominate until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) were first established. This liberal perspective was characterized by a perception of indigenous and common people as “sociocultural entities with regard to whom one could and one should act in order to lead them to modernity” (p. 14), that is, as made up of subjects capable of being redeemed through education. This contrasted with the conservative perspective that argued for their exclusion from participation because of their natural inferiority. This thought-provoking argument is developed in three chapters that deal with the auto-representation of the criollos, the incorporation of indigenous people and the representations of *lo popular*. His sources are primarily documentation from the Colección Documental del Sesquicentenario de la Independencia and various newspapers from the period. In this sense, Rojas’s book provides a good introduction to the debate and the possibilities that it has opened up.

This proposal is similar to other discussions on the history of Latin America. Various authors have demonstrated that during the first years of the wars of independence, the tendency was precisely towards the incorpo-

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1 Translations of quotes are by *Apuntes*.

ration of these groups into political imaginaries and practices, insisting on the possibility of redeeming them through education. It was only during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that those holding this view became pessimistic, and turned to immigration as a solution to end the nation's problems.

While the book provides various important contributions, I will concentrate on those that could fuel a debate that would help improve our understanding of the process of independence, on the cusp of the bicentennial. One issue is the distinction between liberals and conservatives in the early republic. While the former defended isonomy, it is no less true that on various other issues their distance from the so-called conservatives was less evident. The several delays in putting an end to two colonial-era institutions demonstrated how close, rather than distant, the groups were to each other: slavery and the *contribución indígena* tax. It would be interesting to cross check these ideological discussions with the social origins of the leaders of each group. Rojas correctly notes that republican discussions allowed for the participation of popular sectors in politics, but at the same time, the culture and language that accompanied this social mobility had not broken free from factors related to social hierarchies originating in the colonial period, especially in the case of perceptions of skin color.

On the other hand, the so-called liberal criollos faced another representation problem. While independence created a vertical rupture with the metropolis (Spain), another rupture appeared that was as complex as the previous one. Their awareness that they would be unable to maintain a Spanish identity had to be combined with the need to distinguish themselves from other regions of the continent that were in the same situation. Thus, a paradox emerged: what made Peru's liberal criollos different from the metropolis and from their neighbors was the culture that arose out of contact with Indians and Africans. The political need to establish a difference is what led the first generation of republicans to incorporate the indigenous and even the Afro-American within the construction of the nation, as the author notes, assuming the possibility of their redemption by means of education. Nevertheless, this necessity did not develop homogeneously throughout the century – and this was not only because of the limited capacity of the Peruvian state to carry out educational projects, as Rojas explains. One interesting and related matter which merits further study is the relative importance of various conjunctures during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also interesting to note, as the author demonstrates, that during the years when the armed conflict was most intense, the political rhetoric emphasized the incorporation of indigenous and popular sectors, as was undoubtedly necessary to win the war; perhaps the same occurred during the wars between

caudillos. Meanwhile, the consolidation of the Peruvian state, due especially to the monies coming from the guano industry, permitted the centralization of the management of state institutions and, at the same time, ended the indigenous tax and weakened the political importance of the regions that had large indigenous populations. Was this related to the turn toward the construction of a different national imaginary that was more exclusionary?

While it is true, as Rojas points out, that the liberals did not try to exclude indigenous people from the political system, it is more difficult to establish the reasons for this. As we know, the illiterate vote, fundamentally made up of indigenous people, remained in practice until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this sense, the proposals of the criollo liberals seem to be more of an inheritance of the Bourbon experience than liberal republicanism. The crux of the matter seemed to lie in maintaining social and cultural differences, reflected in a notion of “decency” reconstructed after the political changes following independence. Before 1821, this term was associated with moderation and the capacity for self-control, reflected in a large number of regulations and edicts whose purpose was to regulate and modify the customs of the “*bajo pueblo*,” “*populacho*,” “*plebe*.” The Bourbons tried to create a “people” because they needed another side of the coin, indispensable for the delimitation of an enlightened elite. These borders drawn through cultural practices were disqualified though in many cases they were shared transversally.

Independence did not end the tenor of Bourbon policies, evidently because they reflected the aspirations of various sectors of the enlightened Lima elite; the wars led to the weakening of social barriers but at the same time these developments made it possible for popular sector groups to negotiate their participation within the process. One could detest their culture but they were the ones who did the fighting. The ambiguity of the relationship with *lo popular* evident in the fear of the “overflow” of the militias and their organization by castes was also expressed in the norms that attempted to “tidy up” *lo popular*, as illustrated by the regulations cited by the author. This goal has similarities with Bourbon policy, which also sought to reform customs with the object of creating a people consonant with the enlightenment.

In this sense, it is interesting to take a look at the coincidences and contradictions during the first years of the republic between those who considered themselves liberals and those who thought of themselves as conservatives. I think that the former were much closer to the Bourbon reforms and later to the Cadiz experiences, while the latter defended ethnic and caste differences but at the same time were capable of recognizing and defending the

particularities of the different sectors. Nevertheless, in many other aspects the two were much closer in their views than one might think, and for this reason it is important to discover the social origins of each group.

As we can see, Rojas's book raises a series of questions that will certainly contribute to the debate, which is necessary as we approach the bicentennial of Peru. We hope that this author and others will enrich these discussions in the coming years.

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