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HIATT, Willie, 2016, *The Rarefied Air of the Modern: Airplanes and Technological Modernity in the Andes*, Nueva York, Oxford University Press. xi + 229 pp.

In *The Rarefied Air of the Modern*, Willie Hiatt offers a detailed history of how Peruvians interpreted aviation and integrated aviation technology. Written in very lucid prose, the book is also a broad history of Peru in the first half of the 20th century seen through the lens of technology and modernity.

In the first chapter, Hiatt describes how aviation arrived in Peru thanks to the efforts of Jorge Chávez, who was born in Paris. In the decades after the triumph of Chile in the War of the Pacific, many Peruvians searched for a way to improve the future of the country and, in a sense, aviation fulfilled this longed-for goal. Chávez was winning competitions in Europe, and although he died soon after a flight from Cuzco to Puno in 1910, many thought of him as a “source of authenticity and vitality” (p. 24) for Peru. Although the initial drive toward a culture of aviation came from the Lima elite, Hiatt demonstrates that other social classes also celebrated aviation, as happened with the huge welcome accorded the pilot Juan Bielovucic when his ship docked in Callao in 1911.

However, with Bielovucic’s crash in April 1911, aviation in Peru declined. For example, it became difficult for the Peruvian Aviation League (Liga Peruana Pro Aviación) to maintain its discourse since there were no “airplanes, spare parts, or flight instructors” (p. 43) during the second decade of the century. The second chapter delves into this post-1911 Peru, showing how the lack of government support forced the League to turn to citizens for support – an effort undermined by a 1922 report that revealed the precarious conditions at the Aviation Center School (Escuela del Centro de Aviación).

The third chapter centers on Cuzco and the “flying cholo” Alejandro Velasco Astete. Hiatt uses the case of Velasco Astete to show how – at the height of the *indigenist* movement in Cuzco – an individual who was a member of Inca nobility could combine the concept of modernity with Cuzco’s past. Rather than a modernity centered on Lima and spreading out to the Andes and the jungle – the “radiating vectors of aerial routes between Lima and the rest of the country” (p. 59) – “*cuzqueños* employed flight to construct a modern identity built upon a unique claim to the past” (p. 64). Of course, *cuzqueños* already had previous experience with “technological modernity” and Hiatt argues that the difference between the arrival of the railroad to Cuzco in 1908 and the flight of Velasco Astete in 1925 was that

the first was a celebration of the central government while the second had an “uniquely Andean inflection” (p. 69).

Heading further to the east, the fourth chapter deals with the Peruvian jungle. After the Iquitos economic crisis during the first decades of the 20th century, some thought that commercial flights to the jungle were a way of demonstrating and accessing the potential wealth of this region.

In the fifth chapter, the author leaves aside his analyses of specific regions and presents a perspective of Peru as a whole, viewed from the window of an airplane. For many travelers, airplanes provided much quicker access to places that, in previous decades, could only be reached through several much slower means of transportation – train, steamboat, mule, etc. (p. 123). Thus, for Hiatt, aviation allowed many to think that the difficult geography of Peru did not necessarily have to determine the historical trajectory of the country: one traveler, for example, described the different regions as “geographical accidents” (p. 115). Nonetheless, aviation also reproduced the already established images of the country’s regions.

The sixth chapter focuses on airplanes and war. Beginning with the use of airplanes to suppress the APRA rebellion in Trujillo in July 1932, Hiatt goes on to analyze Peru’s conflicts with Colombia (1933) and Ecuador (1941) in order to illustrate the rapid growth of the Peruvian air force. While the previous chapters concentrate on Peru alone, here the author describes the country’s role within various international networks, with emphasis on the United States. After being defeated by Chile in the previous century, and later by Colombia, the victory over Ecuador was converted into a “nationalist moment,” which decades later led to the fame of José Quiñones and his appearance on the 10 soles bill.

The epilogue brings the history of aviation in Peru up to the present, detailing some of the failed commercial ventures. Hiatt reminds us that the emphasis of his book is not on a history of the diffusion of technology and modernity, but rather on how Peruvians conceptualized aviation within the framework of modernity, as a possible “antidote to the failure, missed opportunities, and deficiency that many believed tainted the first century of the Peruvian republic” (p. 155).

Nowhere in his book does Hiatt provide a definition of modernity – something that will leave some readers unsatisfied. Nevertheless, by letting the narrative and the analysis speak for themselves and showing how Peruvians viewed modernity and its possibilities for Peru in the 20th century, Hiatt constructs a notion of modernity based on an analysis of primary sources instead of providing a preformed theoretical definition. This does not mean that the book does not engage with theory but it does so through

the narrative, thereby leaving much of the theoretical heavy lifting to short sections of text and the endnotes.

The Rarefied Air of the Modern also opens space for future research. One interesting area that should prove fruitful is the changing conceptions of modernity and technology from the end of the 19th to the early 20th century, in particular regarding the change from travel by steam locomotion (in boats and trains, which continued to be used) to travel in airplanes, which use only petroleum. Many saw aviation as a faster way of connecting places in Peru in comparison with steam locomotion, but the steamships of the 19th century compressed distance as well, and it is no coincidence that the Grace company – so famous for its use of steam locomotion – founded an aviation company. Might this narrative of technological modernity as savior and then failure have been similar across the two centuries? Were there different discourses of modernity? And if there were, how were they employed in different periods for political, social, and other goals?

More broadly, much of the book is about the relationship between the discursive and the material. Hiatt persuasively argues that dependency theory “cannot explain Peru’s fitful aviation development” (p. 14) but one cannot help but think that a more explicit engagement with the theory would have been productive. At various times, the lack of material resources hindered Peruvian aviation and this perhaps was the product of unequal relations with the “center.” Is there something more in this relationship that would help us explain the difficulties Peruvians had to confront in the 20th century?

The Rarefied Air of the Modern is an indispensable book for the history of Peru and for studies of science and technology, especially in the area outside the North Atlantic. It is a book that researchers can use for new studies on similar subjects and can be included in undergraduate and graduate course readings.

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