

Book Review

- *The Peculiar Revolution: Rethinking the Peruvian Experiment under Military Rule*, edited by Carlos Aguirre and Paolo Drinot. University of Texas Press, 2017.

In the past, the position of the Peruvian Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces, and especially the Velasco years, used to be a heavily discussed topic among social scientists and historians during conceptual and policy debates. However, this discussion ended during the decades of Shining Path and the Fujimori government. Nevertheless, the Velasco period implied a series of economic, social and political reforms that substantially changed Peru and Velasco was a reference for similar reform intents by other militaries in Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, and explicitly Panama under Torrijos and Venezuela under Chávez.

This new edited volume by Aguirre and Pinot, twenty-five years after the last debate about the Velasco years, is therefore very welcome. The book begins with a fine introductory chapter by the editors that at the same time reviews the most influential authors of the previous debate. More than previously, the authors pay attention to the social and cultural politics of the regime. By doing so, this study brings into view new and hitherto unexplored aspects and also shifts the focus from the national to the regional and the local, certainly a quality of the book.

The first part of four chapters is dedicated to significant cultural aspects: the sesquicentennial commemoration of Peru's independence and liberation in 1971 as a reflection on the 'second liberation' by the Armed Forces (by Aguirre); the reintroduction of Tupac Amaru II, not only as the precursor of the independence campaigns but also as the revolutionary forerunner of the Velasco government (Walker); the significance of the massive attendance of Velasco's funeral and its importance for the Velasquismo heirs (by Lerner); and the collective memories of the Velasco government through video uploads on YouTube, a lingering nostalgia for social justice and a sense of community that explains 'why, almost half a century after the coup of 1968, many Peruvians remember Velasco fondly' (Drinot, p. 116).

Velasco implemented a reform programme that was drafted by four colonels during the months prior to the coup. It is very probable that the general was informed about the intended overthrow and reform plan only shortly before the coup. But he approved and entirely adopted the plan and deepened it during his presidential term. He never created a political party; his nationalism was a kind of ‘socialism with a chullo’ as he rationalized it to his military advisers. Instead of a party, the regime created an institution to organize and revolutionize the popular masses, SINAMOS. This unique and complex institution was commanded by the military while a group of civilians (one of them Carlos Delgado, Velasco’s speech writer) occupied the deputy positions. The civilian rank-and-file was also complemented with intelligence officers and police detectives. (As far as I know, a thorough analysis of the functioning of this multiple-functional apparatus in book-form does not exist.) Velasco extended the state bureaucracy with ‘task force’ cabinet members (like Cháves did), leading to Philip’s analyzing remarks that O’Donnell’s ‘bureaucratic authoritarianism’ applies better to Peru under Velasco than to the Southern Cone dictatorships for which it was intended (p. 206).

The role of SINAMOS and the antagonisms within and frictions with other state bureaucracies, trade unions and peasant organizations are mentioned in nearly all following chapters: about the educational reform and the opposing teachers union SUTEP (by Oliart); about the agrarian reform and the opposing Confederación Campesina del Perú (by Heilman); and about the efforts of general Tantalean (Velasco’s brother-in-law) to incorporate the existing labour unions (by Clarke).

There are also two fine chapters focused on the SINAMOS: a comparative study of its role and functioning in three Peruvian regions (Cant) and the final chapter written by Varese, who was in charge of the indigenous Amazonia communities during the Velasco years.

Two other sectoral and regional studies refer to the voluminous studies about a water project in the northern desert coast (by Carey) and to conflicting eco-tourism around Cusco and the (fortunately failed) hotel project adjacent to Machu Picchu (Rice).

The chapter by Hurtado about nationalist rhetoric and military culture is what I liked most in this edited volume. It deals with the revolutionary mystique of nationalist soldiers of the left. Velasco’s government was an ‘experiment’, as mentioned in the title of this book and in some of the previous studies on Velasco. But the Peruvian case is not the only example of a left-wing military government that tried to change the destiny of the nation by revolutionary reforms. During previous studies I compared the speeches of Arbenz in Guatemala, Che Guevara in Cuba, Velasco in Peru, Torrijos in Panama and Chávez in Venezuela about the vanguard role of the Armed Forces in society and the indivisible unity between Army and People; those of Velasco, Torres and Chavez could have been interchangeable. Therefore, I would like to advocate a

comparative study by the editors of this excellent and innovative book about other Latin American ‘military experiments’.

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