

Book Review

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

General Juan Velasco Alvarado's 1968 military coup in Peru and subsequent seven-year reign proved a distinct counterexample in an era marked by right-wing juntas and reactionary Cold War ideologues. His government seized power only a day after Mexico's infamous Tlatelolco massacre of students, a landmark in that nation's ongoing dirty war that mirrored Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships in repressing leftist alternatives. Thus, as editors Carlos Aguirre and Paul Drinot point out, the apparent leftist rhetoric and practices of the RGAF (Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces) under Velasco came as a surprise to observers and became a fascination for scholars.

The Peculiar Revolution's thirteen chapters seek to reappraise the Velasco years (1968–1975) in a way that utilizes new methodologies on developed historiographic arguments and derives innovative interpretations that promote a more sophisticated and complex view of the regime and its legacies. The authors consider a fundamental contradiction in examining exactly how a coercive military government could, while claiming to be revolutionary and apolitical, undertake sweeping changes against social injustice, inequality, foreign domination, and traditional land tenure, and even make efforts toward the inclusion of long-relegated indigenous peoples and their places. The essential questions underpinning the book repeatedly deal with the fine line the regime walked. First, how can a repressive, basically violent, regime mobilize mass engagement and wide political participation without relinquishing its own power and projects? Second, to the degree that the regime and its institutions effected changes, how successful, or flawed, were they, and what legacies and memories persisted?

The title, *The Peculiar Revolution*, suggests at least some of the editors' answers to these questions as it draws from Eric Hobsbawm's insight that the RGAF managed to create change but did not garner supportive mass mobilization. At the same time, the editors and most of the contributors also cite Abraham Lowenthal, who termed it an ambiguous revolution—an anticommunist leftist government, both authoritarian and nonrepressive, and with an anticapitalist proinvestment economic stance. In combination these outlooks frame how this book "rethinks" the revolution by focusing on the

diversity of experiences, rife with contradictions that mark the era for participants from all parts of Peruvian society. The revolution proved both too dramatic and too limited, too short for many and far too radical for others; its memory remains a mixture of disillusionments, regrets, and nostalgia.

The Peculiar Revolution begins with the cultural politics of the era in Part 1 (celebrations, rhetoric, funerals, memory), then follows with institutional work (labor, military, education) in Part 2, and concludes in Part 3 with regional and ethnographic diversities (local experiences, environment, indigenous peoples).

The abstract efforts of the regime (RGAF and also SINAMOS—Sistema Nacional de Apoyo a la Movilización Social, its executive policy side) to shape the military government and junta into a proper revolution required the creation of a new historical narrative and iconography and its dissemination to the Peruvian public. They hoped to gain popular support, instill a sense of military nationalism, and frame what they had done as the beginning point for a new and exclusively Peruvian independence. In doing so, perhaps the regime could tap into sentiment for much-needed legitimacy, convince the public to suffer sacrifices, and, in time, leave the revolutionary governance to nonmilitary rule.

Chapters by Carlos Aguirre and Charles Walker examine the sesquicentennial celebrations of 1971 and the propagandistic efforts (through music, parades, statuary, and film) to rewrite a national history that eschewed Pizarro's role and made Tupac Amaru II in the 1770s the hero of independence, rather than San Martín and Bolívar who "rescued" Peru from Spain in 1821. In this new telling, Tupac's violent rebellion was justified as a last resort, much as the RGAF claimed for its own cause. The regime did not always succeed in making its cultural case, but it did, as Adrian Lerner shows, inspire mass engagements, but on their own terms. In his chapter on Velasco's funeral he shows that the people were quite capable of taking matters into their own hands, as they usurped the official ceremonies to honor the general as they chose. Ironically, the military eventually broke their mourning with an iron fist. The emotional outpouring of that day bequeathed the popular, conflicted memories of Peruvians today. Paul Drinot takes on collective memory by examining Youtube comments for videos reflecting on the revolutionary era. As with the other chapters in this section, he demonstrates the cultural divides and emotional baggage left by Velasco's experiment. Part 1 stands out as the more innovative and refreshing section of the overall work.

Somewhat more conventional is Part 2, which seeks the peculiar revolution within institutions and programs, including education, land reform, and the culture of the military. Patricia Oliart shows how the 1972 educational reforms drew from transnational ideas, including Freire's radical pedagogy, to attempt to inspire revolutionary fervor. She argues persuasively that new indigenous language policies and, more crucially, teacher professionalization marked a critical change for the nation. The chapter by Judith Heilman details the ideological split in the peasant/farmer associations that sought new land reforms, as groups like the Confederación Campesina del Perú (CCP), Confederación Nacional Agraria (CNA), and others worked out politics on their own terms. Although not especially surprising on the face of it, she makes great use of interviews to reveal a rural politics both stubborn and resistant to change. Lourdes Hurtado delves into military culture in her chapter, demonstrating

how the armed forces later made efforts to “forget” Velasco officially, even while some held onto his ideals. Hurtado illustrates the armed forces’ own version of itself—one with more indigenous members in its branches, one resisting foreign domination, one with a marked inferiority complex due to historical losses, and one that now hinged its identity on the twin ideals of dignity and “huevos.” Quite compelling, her findings also echo those of Drinot’s commenters whose language similarly either sought nostalgia or dismissal of the revolution using the ideas of dignity and “huevos.” The final chapter in this section by George Philip provides a standard, brief, and largely political analysis that might fit better elsewhere as an introduction to the historiography.

The final section of the book works to flesh out the diversity of revolutionary experiences in different areas of Peru, from an environmental perspective and from an indigenous point of view. Anna Cant comparatively examines the regional variations in land reform to show how previous political engagements and economic structures prefigured revolutionary outcomes. Bureaucratic overreach flawed the failed process in Piura; strong campesino organization shaped reform efforts in Cuzco; and political indifference left peasants unimpressed and unaffected in Tacna. Mark Carey studies the Chavimochic dam and irrigation project and suggests that its implementation owed much to Velasco’s agrarian and water legal reforms. He points out that the impending failure of the project comes from persistent droughts and shrinking glaciers. Nathan Clarke focuses his chapter on the labor movements in Chimbote as the nationalized anchovy fishery, along with solidarity-minded steel workers, struggled against a regime imposing conservation measures. The workers provided an excellent example of the mass engagement that the RGAF and SINAMOS theoretically sought, but in this case, it fought the regime and its technocratic regulations against overfishing. Political participation was met with machine guns and tear gas, illustrating once again the contradiction to the peculiar revolution. Mark Rice turns his attention to Cuzco and the rising tourism industry (under yet another institute, COPESCO—Plan Turístico y Cultural Perú-UNESCO) that attempted to take advantage of Machu Picchu after the opening of new airports in 1968. While the regime hoped to offer new employment and gain hard currency, conflicts over cultural patrimony set many against the potential damage to the historic sites. Worse yet, dirty, drug-smoking hippies began to arrive rather than wholesome, well-heeled families. While this chapter might have fit better in the first section of the volume, it demonstrates again how local values and identities did not always match the fabric of Velasco’s revolutionary nation. Stefano Verase’s final chapter makes this same point abundantly clear and does so from the point of view of a participant who served in the Velasco government. He details how the regime knew virtually nothing about the indigenous peoples in Amazonia, and how he and his colleagues brought an awareness of ethnic identities and their unique worldviews and environmental perspectives. His experience demonstrates how the few changes for the indigenous remained limited—use of their languages in registering with the government and permission to discuss federation—due not to the regime’s indifference (now symbolically invested in Tupac), but simply due to a lack of capacity and knowledge. While there is symmetry in ending the work on the indigenous chapter, one cannot help but wish it felt less like an afterthought.

The editors proclaim that what is beyond question is that the Velasco regime delivered a radical transformation of the entire society, even if not all promises were fulfilled, or all benefits delivered.

Change happened. Aguirre, Walker, Oliart, Cant, and Verase prove persuasively that the RGAF did, in fact, profoundly shape Peru with lasting effects. Contrary to Hobsbawm, mass mobilization did occur—this aptly proven in chapters by Lerner, Clarke, and Rice. Yet as Lowenthal suggested, coercion and repression happened too, as demonstrated by Clarke, Cant, Heilman, and Philip, and in a somewhat different cultural context, Aguirre, Walker, and Hurtado. The confused populist-statist rhetoric of a free open society for the masses ruled by the military fist appears in every chapter. Taken in total, this volume delivers on its promise of “a richer and more complex interpretation” (13).

Taken individually, some chapters have issues that undermine their potential impact. Aguirre’s chapter has considerable overlap with Walker’s, and it would benefit both to offer further consideration of the reception of this new revolutionary culture. Did Peruvians buy the argument that “Velasco is like a new Tupac”? Likewise, for Lerner’s chapter, did Peruvians cry for Velasco the day after the funeral, or did the extraordinary outpouring have little to do with the man himself? Drinot’s approach, while innovative and thought-provoking, raises some questions too. How did he exclude trolls from the selected comments he studied? Often commenters neither watch the video nor read others’ comments, and this might indicate something other than memory at work. As a source, which groups are omitted from this? As a whole, the institutional focuses offer fewer surprises and at times seem to confirm the obvious: farmers have opinions and politics, water laws can be antienvironmental, hippies are bad tourists, regions vary. My quibbles aside, all the chapters show considerable research and thoughtful interpretations.

The Peculiar Revolution is an excellent work that provides a nuanced and detailed study of Velasco’s revolution and its legacies. Specialists and scholars will find a complex look into a fascinatingly-weird leftist junta that challenges the usually straightforward approach to Cold War politics. Dedicated leftists will find a conundrum familiar to failed Marxist regimes. Militarists may have to reconsider the actual capacity of armed forces to deal with anything remotely social or cultural in nature. Some of the chapters will work exceptionally well for undergraduate classes, and read as a whole, this book will spark discussion and suit any graduate seminar dealing with revolution, Latin America, or even a survey of methodologies. The text offers a valuable and insightful perspective on Velasco’s wild experiment that should inform our teaching and consideration of the Cold War well beyond Peru.

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