
Book Review

Aguirre, Carlos and Paulo Drinot. *The Peculiar Revolution: Rethinking the Peruvian Experiment Under Military Rule*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017

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Abstract

Review of 'The Peculiar Revolution: Rethinking the Peruvian Experiment under Military Rule' by Aguirre, Carlos and Paulo Drinot.

Keywords: Peru; military history; cultural memory; Juan Velasco Alvarado; Túpac Amaru, military government; Shining Path

The bombing of General Juan Velasco Alvarado's tomb in El Ángel cemetery by Shining Path militants in 1980 was an inauspicious beginning for the public memory of the Gobierno Revolucionario de las Fuerzas Armadas (GRFA, 1968–78). This excellent new volume, however, edited by eminent Peruvian historians Carlos Aguirre and Paulo Drinot, provides an important and timely reassessment of the radical potential, structural contradictions and uneven legacy of Velasco and the GRFA. Over 13 substantive chapters, *The Peculiar Revolution* demonstrates the radical nature of the military government's rhetoric and brings into question whether many Leftist political parties and grassroots movements were right to shun it, believing that the regime was of a fascist, militaristic character. That being said, the volume also highlights the institutional failings of the GRFA, including an overreliance on Velasco himself and an obsession with centralising and co-opting existing radical social movements in Peru.

Although the volume is interdisciplinary in its methods, the contributors seek to historicise Velasco and his legacy, tying the GRFA's infamous Agrarian Reform, educational reforms, nationalisation programmes and mobilisation of civil society to ongoing projects of modernisation and nation-building. In this sense, the volume sits well alongside other recent reinterpretations of Velasco's legacy by Anna Cant, Jaymie Patricia Heilman (both of whom also contribute chapters to this work) and Enrique Mayer. By reassessing the reforms carried out by Velasco (1968–75) and his successor as head of the GRFA Francisco Morales Bermúdez (1975–78), the book allows for a more complex view of how this period precipitated the internal war initiated by Shining Path in 1980. Whereas previous analyses have tended to view the Agrarian Reform as sowing the seeds of political violence, the chapters by Cant and Heilman instead point to the mobilisation of civil society, the frustrated ambitions of the Left after Velasco's death and Leftist factionalism. In this sense, the volume can also be read alongside other re-assessments of the long-term causes and pre-history of the internal armed conflict by Ponciano del Pino, Américo Meza Salcedo and Miguel La Serna.

The Peculiar Revolution is notable for the innovative and original methods it deploys to reassess Peru's 'experiment under military rule', which has a far greater value than a simple political or economic re-evaluation of the era. The first of the three sections takes a distinctly cultural view of the GRFA, arguing that Velasco's regime deployed radical symbolism and imagery to hint at a much greater potential than it has previously been attributed. Carlos Aguirre and Charles Walker's chapters could be read as one longer contribution which demonstrates how the military regime used the 150th anniversary of Peruvian independence and the image of colonial rebel Túpac Amaru II as means of presenting itself as the harbinger of a delayed Independence from Spanish rule and global capital. Adrián Lerner argues, against the backdrop of Velasco's funeral, that this symbolism was significant in fostering a deeper sense of attachment to Velasco among poorer, more indigenous Peruvians than has previously been recognised, whilst Paulo Drinot highlights how these images are re-mobilised today in contested online debates about Velasco's legacy.

The second section takes a more institutional approach, analysing not only the GRFA and its new administrations but also how pre-existing institutions influenced, or were influenced by, the military regime. Patricia Oliart examines the curious mix of intellectuals who contributed to Velasco's educational reforms; Heilman demonstrates the splintering of the Peruvian Peasant Confederation under Velasco; and Lourdes Hurtado highlights the underappreciated radical nature and indigenous background of a generation of Peruvian Army officers who prompted the revolution, and their paternalistic view of the role of the military in Peruvian society. George Philip's contribution assesses the difficulties faced by the GRFA after Velasco became ill in 1973, but amid a volume of innovative approaches to the era based on recent research, this contribution (with only two works referenced published in this millennium, one of which is the author's own) seems out of place.

The final, and most engaging, section takes a regional approach to the military government as contributions compare how this project of radical military nationalism was accepted and contested in Peru's Andean, Amazonian, and coastal regions. Not only does this section spatially decentralise the revolution; these perspectives give an appreciation of the multiple human and non-human actors that shaped the revolution from below which has been hitherto lacking in the literature. Chapters by Carey, Rice and Varese demonstrate how the centralising tendencies of national revolution were limited and

contested by Peru's diverse and unpredictable environment. Clarke and Cant, meanwhile, analyse how varying degrees of previous grassroots mobilisation provided an uneven human terrain onto which the GRFA's reforms would be mapped.

In short, this is a broad, original and engaging volume which holds important lessons not only for students of Peruvian history or Latin America's military regimes, but also for those interested in radical politics more widely. As *The Peculiar Revolution* highlights, the lesson of Peru's experiment under military rule is that contradictions within the institution which seeks to deliver the revolution can be just as limiting as any opposition to the platform it seeks to enact.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest linked to this article.