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– *The Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, by James E. Sanders. Duke University Press, 2014.

This book presents an erudite and rich analysis on the early history of the Latin American republics (although mainly focused on Colombia and Mexico). Sanders argues that early Latin American republicanism – what he calls ‘American republican modernity’ – was a genuine and authentic attempt to create an inclusive and original democracy. This attempt has, from the late nineteenth century onwards, been obscured and made invisible by Latin American intellectuals and politicians, on the one hand, and by twentieth century historiography, on the other. In its repetitive and urgent insistence on this point, his book resembles Carlos Forment’s book of 2003, which tried to rescue the

humanist tradition in the region by similarly focusing on the early Latin American republics.

Sanders believes that Latin American democratic republicanism in many ways preceded and inspired Western democratic ideas and practices. At the end of his book, defending himself against potential criticism that he is exaggerating his point, Sanders writes (p. 235): ‘I am arguing that the dependence of Europe and the United States on Latin America for the survival and maturation of democratic political culture in the nineteenth century has not been sufficiently acknowledged’. In a relatively short Introduction, Sanders sets the agenda of his book. He takes the execution of Austrian emperor Maximilian in Mexico in 1867 as point of departure: ‘[T]he bullets cut down not just a man but the very idea that civilization and modernity emanated from Europe’ (p. 2). The Latin American republican consciousness, which expressed itself in the execution, challenged the primacy of Europe as the imperial and economic centre for dictating the future. Sanders suggests that this early consciousness contained democratic and inclusive elements (especially in terms of race) that would later be lost when U.S. imperialism and ‘Western industrial modernity’ took hold of the continent.

Sanders’ book is chronologically composed around seven chapters that, although somewhat loosely connected, are all meant to sustain his main argument. He starts with the so-called Garibaldinos, the troops of the Italian nationalist Giuseppe, ‘José’, Garibaldi who was exiled to Uruguay in 1842 and fought for the beleaguered Colorado Party in Montevideo. These Garibaldinos were a mix of foreigners and slaves who aspired after freedom and citizenship. Sanders sees their fight as the symbolic battle ‘between tyranny and besieged liberty and independence’ (p. 28). In the second erudite chapter of his book, Sanders analyses the political and ideological debates which emerged in Latin America after Independence. He shows the rich variety of ideas on freedom, democracy and modernity in Latin America which demonstrated how ‘subalterns were trying to find a voice’ (p. 57). Next, he focuses on the history of the San Patricio Battalion, which fought the U.S. during the Mexican War of 1846-48. This War seriously tested the democratic ideals of the early republics, but did not alter them in any meaningful way.

Chapter 4 may be considered the lynchpin of the book. It is a very long (55 pages) analysis of the popular and subaltern attempts to influence Latin American republican modernity and to appropriate its ideas of citizenship. Chapter 5 focuses on the Chilean intellectual, Francisco Bilbao who, according to Sanders, more than any other single writer embodied the spirit of American republican modernity. The race question takes pride of place in chapter 6 which focuses on David Peña who became a famous representative of the Afro-Colombian population and embodied something that Sanders cautiously calls ‘black liberalism’. With his death in 1877 the republican project with its democratic and inclusive promises ceded ‘pride of place to visions of civilization explicitly white, European, and premised on limited citizenship’ (p. 175). This

‘collapse’ is the object of Sanders’ last empirical chapter. He shows how the ascent to power by Porfirio Diaz in 1876 was symbolic for a new political and economic project based on authoritarian capitalism and exclusion.

There is much to say for Sanders’ insistence on a viable and resistant republican modernity in Latin America, which was sadly destroyed by late nineteenth century capitalism and exclusive authoritarianism. His examples are both interesting and eminently readable. At the same time, they provoke some crucial questions. The most important one is his tendency to see republican modernity as contained in time, between the 1840s and 1870s. Would it not be much more convincing to see republican modernity as one of the ideological tendencies characterizing Latin America in the nineteenth and twentieth century? This would have allowed him to show the continuity between nineteenth century republican modernity and early twentieth century *indigenismo*, popular nationalism or socialism in Latin America. To me, this continuity of democratic republicanism is one of the most interesting elements in Latin American political history. At the same time, and this is my second commentary, it would have forced Sanders to place his examples in the context of already existing exclusionary and authoritarian projects in the nineteenth century.

All in all, his choice of Mexico and Colombia, shortly legitimized on p. 19, seems to colour his analysis more than Sanders would like to admit. The *Cono Sur*, for example, was less directly influenced by U.S. imperialism and more connected to Europe and seems to have gone through a different development. In a different way, the same is true for the countries in Central America and the Andes, where the large indigenous presence strongly coloured the debates on inclusion and democracy. It seems difficult to talk about a progressive republican modernity in countries like Peru or Bolivia. So, just as the book by Carlos Forment that I reviewed in this same journal (No. 79, October 2005, pp. 148-50), Sanders’ book presents many thought-provoking ideas and brilliant insights, but in the end fails to convince the reader. This is unfortunate because I think that both books point at genuine and authentic elements of Latin American political culture.

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Reference

Forment, C. (2003). *Democracy in Latin America, 1760-1900* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press.