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Review/Reseña

Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia, 1795-1831*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

Pardo Patriots and the Construction of the Myth of Racial Democracy in Colombia

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When drafting the new Constitution at Cádiz in 1811, liberal Spanish deputies of the Cortes (parliament) opposed the granting of citizenship to *pardos* (free people of African descent). In response, one *pardo* published a pamphlet in which he lamented the exclusion of *pardos* whose desire it was to have equal rights. Utilizing the language of liberalism he declared, “When united in society we gave up our liberty / It was to be happy like citizens / For that reason we bestowed our rights on the king / And leaving

our land in wars we sacrificed ourselves / But what advantages did we get?" He then called upon his "fellow patriots," arguing that "*pardos* should not be excluded from elections" (53).

This *pardo* hardly fits the image of the lower classes that was promoted by elite contemporaries, such as José Manuel Restrepo and Simón Bolívar, who tended to view them as "backward," and "unintelligent." While acknowledging the involvement of the lower classes in the movements for independence in Spanish America, elites dismissed their participation as merely due to their desire for booze and cash. In her important study, Marixa Lasso challenges the notion put forth by elites that the lower classes were ignorant of republican principles and mere "followers of demagogues." Republicanism, in the eyes of nineteenth century elites and historians, was solely an elite illusion, a view that Lasso notes has subsequently been accepted by historians in the twentieth century. Lasso affirms that historians in the 1960s and 1970s accepted this "binary discourse of elite illusion and lower-class primitiveness" as they argued that the lower classes were used by an exploitative elite as cannon fodder in the wars of independence, which resulted in little social and economic change (4).

On the contrary, Lasso's study sheds new light on this discourse and argues that the Age of Revolution in Colombia was an era of considerable social and political transformation in which *pardos* played a principal role in the construction of republican politics and racial dynamics. Lasso demonstrates that the Cádiz debates and the political participation of *pardos* as patriots constituted momentous but overlooked historical moments. She shows that vigorous debates regarding questions of citizenship and representation ensued in racially diverse areas like Cartagena prior to the enactment of the Cádiz Constitution of 1812. *Pardos'* political actions and demands led to the declaration of racial equality among all free men by both *pardo* and creole patriots as well as the construction of a powerful and enduring myth of racial harmony, as racial equality was linked to nationalism. Thus, Lasso concludes that the origins of the myth of racial democracy are not to be found in late nineteenth century Cuba or Brazil, but in the Age of Revolution, and that Gran

Colombia played a historic role in the construction of modern race relations.

Using an array of sources, including parliamentary debates, speeches, and especially court cases and other judicial records, Lasso demonstrates that despite enlightened ideas that privileged merit over birth, the call for racial equality was still a radical notion in the 1790s. Surprisingly, less than two decades later, such an ideology was dominant among creoles. The years from 1810-1812 were critical as creoles not only joined with *pardos* in conspiracies to depose Spanish authorities, but also argued in opposition to the Cortes at Cádiz that denied citizenship to people of African descent. One could conclude that creoles were only interested in *pardo* citizenship in order to increase their influence in a system based on proportional representation. Indeed that is a valid argument during the initial phases of these debates. However, Lasso masterfully demonstrates that in response to *pardo* political demands for inclusion and Spanish concerns that the granting of citizenship to Afro-Colombians would lead to racial conflict and corporatism, creoles adapted modern liberal notions of citizenship and nation to the Spanish American reality of racial heterogeneity. Creoles set out to prove that unity prevailed among Americans of all colors, as they shared a common spirit and morality that stood in stark contrast to Spanish virtues. Racial inequality and slavery were linked to Spanish cruelty and despotism, while a new independent America symbolized freedom, harmony, unity, and republican virtue. Thus, by setting the more modern Americas in stark contrast to Spain's cruel and monarchical past, "what began as a tactical attempt to secure a larger number of American representatives had become a powerful nationalist construct" (51). After Cádiz, "to oppose racial equality was to be unpatriotic and un-American" (36). Racial harmony became linked with republican virtue and national identity. The reality of race relations was, of course, more complicated, but the myth of racial harmony had been created.

The years of the first Republic in Cartagena, 1810-1815, were times of substantial political and social transformation. Racial ideology had been turned on its head. For a fleeting moment, Lasso argues, "the rigid hierarchical etiquette of colonial times had given way to revolutionary

egalitarianism” (79). Lasso shows how *pardos* embraced the unprecedented autonomy and opportunity for political participation during this period when established rules for political participation were lacking and hotly contested. *Pardos* served as Congressmen, imprisoned Spaniards, denounced those whom they viewed as “aristocratic,” and demanded the election of their candidate for governor through mob action declaring that it was “the will of the people” (81). Armed crowds of blacks and mulattoes backed by *pardo* artisans forced the creole junta of Cartagena to declare independence on November 11, 1811. Lasso declares, then, that independence was characterized not by harmony, but by factionalism and violence. To creole elites such behavior was unprecedented and alarming, especially considering that a slave revolt in Haiti had resulted in the establishment of an independent, black republic. *Pardos* employed the discourse of racial equality and became political actors to a degree that surpassed the intentions of the elite. White elites cried anarchy. Lasso argues that the actions of the lower classes were depoliticized in upper-class discourse. The creole description of the lower classes as “raucous bandits” and “demagogues” was written into official patriotic history thus erasing their influential role. The creole elite declared that republicanism was only possible on paper, an illusion that brought only disorder and immorality. According to Lasso, the problem for elites was not the indifference and ignorance of the lower classes toward modern politics as the prevailing historiography would have it, but the excessive participation of the latter (87).

Social relations had changed. Whites felt a “novel sense of social vulnerability” while *pardos* felt a “new sense of empowerment” (103). Throughout the era, *pardos* would use republican rhetoric to challenge continued racism on the part of elites and to demand equality. The elite responded with cries of race war. Lasso skillfully demonstrates that the language of race war and racial harmony coexisted and creoles saw no gray area between the two. Since creoles believed that racial harmony and equality already existed, any expression of racial grievances was viewed as unpatriotic. In their eyes, those who expressed racial grievances were guilty of inciting race war and, as the trial records prove, this could lead to “fatal

personal and political consequences” (142). The expression of racial grievances and debates about race were thus “expunged from legitimate public discourse” (143). When *pardos* were tried for sedition and threats of race war, the elites were forced to prove to central authorities that racial harmony already existed and conflict resulted only from the actions of “seditious” *pardos*, who were often banished or executed. Thus, Lasso contends that the central state also played a significant role in delegitimizing racial grievances and upholding the myth of racial harmony, the implications of which were long-lasting as the myth was incorporated into nationalist discourse while limits were also placed on the ways in which continued racial inequality could be addressed (150, 155).

Lasso has provided an insightful analysis that sheds new light on the construction of nationalist racial discourses during the Age of Revolution. In contrast to the United States and Haiti, she asserts that it was in Spanish America where racial equality and modern democracy were first linked. Calling into question some of the prevailing interpretations of the independence period as representing only colonial continuities, she demonstrates that it was an era of considerable uncertainty and political and social change in which *pardos* participated actively. At times, Lasso rather hastily extends her conclusions for Cartagena to the rest of Spanish America. Nonetheless, *Myths of Harmony* and the questions raised should serve as a model for other scholars of the Age of Revolution. *Myths of Harmony* is a fascinating study that makes valuable contributions to scholarly discussions of the independence period as well as the connections between race, class, and nation.