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Review/Reseña

Severo Martínez Peláez, *La Patria del Criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala*, translated by Susan M. Neve and W. George Lovell, edited and introduced by W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009

Revisiting a Classic: Martínez Peláez in Translation

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This labor of love, completed in stages by two distinguished scholars of colonial Guatemala in conjunction with a noted translator over a period of nearly two decades, makes available to English-speaking readers a highly readable if truncated version of a work to which the term “classic” may be applied without qualifications. Severo Martínez Peláez’s Marxist-oriented assessment of Guatemala’s colonial era and its legacy for the country’s subsequent development, first published by the Universidad de San Carlos in 1970 as *La patria del criollo: ensayo de interpretación de la realidad*

colonial guatemalteca, has served ever since as a touchstone at a number of levels both for Guatemalans themselves and for foreign students and other *extranjeros* interested in a historical explanation of the country's violent recent past. It is probably the most influential historical analysis of the colonial Guatemalan experience published in Spanish in the last 40 years, if not necessarily within, then certainly beyond the academic world. Long a staple in Guatemalan classrooms and on graduate reading lists elsewhere, in translation it deserves to gain a second life in English-language universities as a provocative introduction for sophisticated undergraduates and other non-specialists to the "reality" alluded to in the title of the Spanish original and, perhaps as much, to the distinctive historiographical moment in which it first emerged.

Scholars of Central American history and historiography, meanwhile, will appreciate the editors' extended and thoughtful introduction, in which an outline of Martínez Peláez's life and intellectual trajectory produces a certain flash of recognition to illuminate the subsequent discussion of the nature of the book, the circumstances of its publication, and various assessments of it, including the editors' own. Latin Americanists less familiar with either the contents or iconic status of the original work should derive a clear sense of both its political and historiographical significance from this introductory commentary while also finding themselves well prepared for what follows, not least because the editors address head on, sympathetically but honestly, several of the book's more controversial elements (more on these below). Additional editorial touches include an excellent map, a glossary of untranslated terms, and a rather haunting photograph of the author taken in 1992 toward the end of his life during a brief return to his childhood home, Quetzaltenango, from a lengthy Mexican exile induced by counter-revolutionary violence. All of these features enhance the attractiveness of the volume, whether employed as a medium for bringing a distinctive Central American voice to an English-speaking readership or as a companion to the Spanish-language original.

The translation itself succeeds in accomplishing the twin objectives of the translators as they define them in citing the influence, respectively, of

Mark Fried (translator of Eduardo Galeano) and Walter Benjamin: “to give Severo a voice in English as distinctive as the one he most resolutely commands in Spanish” (x), and to give “voice to the original not as reproduction but as harmony” (xxxviii). The latter vision, if perhaps always admirable, of necessity shaped a project operating under sharp publishing constraints. Readers of the original will take note of the concision, even at 300 pages of text, of the translation of a work that runs to nearly 800 pages in Spanish. As the editors inform us, a press as sympathetic as Duke to an endeavor of this sort was unable to countenance publishing the full version of the manuscript as initially translated, necessitating some hard editorial choices. For a model of how to proceed in modifying a text “to suit the needs of a North American university press and an English-reading public” (xxxviii) they turned to Lesley Byrd Simpson’s work in the 1960s on translations of classic studies of Mexican history by the French scholars François Chevalier and Robert Ricard.

The modification most immediately obvious to anyone who has pursued the author’s argument and commentary on sources through the original work’s lengthy endnotes¹ will be the reduction of this extensive volume of extra-textual material to a relatively small number of footnotes and the occasional incorporation of salient points into the main text itself. That text has been subjected to significant rearrangement and excision in the service of economy as well, if also sometimes to eliminate the author’s errors of fact, as when he displaces the sojourn in Guatemala of the English Dominican observer Thomas Gage from the actual dates, 1627-1637, to the “primera década del siglo XVII,” or to tone down rhetorical flourishes such as references to the iron dictates of “la Historia Universal,” which would sound dated in an age when we are all jaded critics of grand metanarratives and yet reveal much about the context in which the work emerged.² Not that either Martínez Peláez’s historical materialism or his (arguably

¹ These take up fully 120 pages--printed in something on the order of 10-point font—in the edition owned by this reviewer. See Severo Martínez Peláez, *La patria del criollo: ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (México, D.F.: Ediciones en Marcha, 1994). Citations below from this edition, identified as a reprinting of the 4th in which the author introduced one clarificatory modification, are sometimes off by one page from the original.

² Martínez Peláez, 114, 119.

contradictory) revolutionary sympathies are left in much doubt by the translation. “At no point do I seek to judge the individuals or the groups to whom I am alluding; at no point do I wish to suggest that they could have acted in different ways than they did,” reads the translated Preamble, “because their conduct was molded by historical factors more powerful than their own will” (4). Three paragraphs later comes the author’s declaration of an intent that goes well beyond simple explanation of the operation of inexorable historical forces, a desire “to lay bare the limitations of the old notion of a criollo ‘patria’ or homeland; once this has been achieved, a path lies open for the emergence of an increasingly broader concept of a Guatemalan *patria*, one far more inclusive and all-embracing, in keeping with the democratic ideals of the era in which we live” (4). And how to effect this strikingly idealistic aim? “From the start ... I had a specific audience in mind, one I envision being educated but non-specialist ... people I think of as active mediators between myself as author and sectors of the public who do not read” (4). Readers new to the work but knowledgeable about the larger historical context in which it emerged will already have a clear sense of the reasons for the book’s initial reception as described by the editors: “[if] scholarly appraisals were mixed, far more enthusiastic was the book’s reception among the revolutionary left...” (xxiv).

Indeed, the sweeping if lightly glossed claims made toward the conclusion of the book with regard to the continuity of colonial structures into the mid-twentieth century have long made it a favorite of scholars of more recent periods as well as non-academic activists seeking a “deep” historical explanation of Guatemala’s tortured, post-1954 experience. And the author’s extended treatment of the origins of those structural components is not only undeniably powerful, but rings decidedly familiar for students of the modern nation, given his primary emphasis on the nakedly exploitative nature of a colonial regime underpinned ultimately by terror and manifested most clearly in the system of forced native labor known as *repartimiento*. It is a book that “makes sense” of the present, and the flowing English version will understandably (and legitimately) be used thus in response to the imperative contained in one of Martínez Peláez’s

concluding declarations: “Understanding what happened under Spanish rule in Guatemala helps us understand Guatemala’s problems today” (296). That it directly addresses this imperative while at the same time incorporating enlightening asides on such matters as the precise nature of the significance of artisans in a pre-industrial world should certainly widen its appeal as a pedagogical tool.

Nevertheless, the book falls somewhat short of constituting the “scientific” description of an “objective colonial reality” promised by the author’s intellectual framework. As might be expected, other students of the colonial era in Guatemala, or Central or Latin America more broadly, have been among its least enthusiastic readers, regardless of political orientation. Paradoxically, many of the weaknesses noted by specialists arise out of the book’s central conceit and one of its most engaging elements: the elaboration of a *criollo* mindset largely out of the musings of a single individual, Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán, as contained in his late-seventeenth-century *Recordación Florida*. Martínez Peláez did employ the published works of other major colonial commentators as well, from Gage to the Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz, and he also examined a good deal of unpublished archival material in both Guatemala and Spain (even if, frustratingly, he was most specific in identifying it when citing evidence produced in the early nineteenth century that is not especially reliable as a guide to earlier history). But he saw Fuentes y Guzmán’s contribution as unique: a “genuine landscape of Guatemala” that was at the same time *necessarily* “shot through with subjectivity” (76). It afforded the author of *La patria del criollo* precisely what he needed to illuminate criollos’ sense of entitlement and their accompanying resentment of *peninsulares* or anyone else who appeared to threaten their privileged position. In translation, his painstaking yet thoroughly engaging unpicking of that distinctive subjectivity should have wide appeal as an exemplar of the sort of close textual critique that came, ironically, to dominate much English-language scholarship with the fracturing of the analytical dispensation to which he adhered.

The problems created by excessive reliance on a source shot through with criollo subjectivity are evident when the discussion turns to the rest of

colonial society, as are the limitations of the analytical lens through which Martínez Peláez viewed that society. As noted earlier, readers of the editors' introduction will have been alerted to some of the book's more controversial features while also being made aware of the fact that, as is often the case with an influential work, these features have sparked fruitful research into aspects of colonial life which the author is charged with mischaracterizing. One such feature, not surprisingly, is a sharp tendency to treat ethnicity and race as epiphenomena and ultimately reducible in their entirety to class relations. Another involves the claim that an "agrarian blockade" almost uniformly prevented "mestizos" living in the countryside from acquiring land during the colonial era, an assertion the editors describe as "overstated" while providing a reference to a number of subsequent, archivally based studies which largely undermine it. And, yes, if readers of this review suspect that the (in fact incessant) use of the term "mestizos" in a study that frequently and categorically denies the importance of non-class distinctions might be a potential source of contradiction, they have identified one of its great "teachable moments."

One noteworthy manifestation of this contradiction emerges in the original work's lengthy and groundbreaking, if also unsettling, sixth chapter, "El Mestizaje y Las Capas Medias," broken down in the translated version into two chapters entitled "Race Mixture and the Middle Strata" and "Class Dynamics and the Middle Strata." In this section of the book the author performed the remarkable feat of first highlighting evidence of the presence of numerous enslaved Africans in early colonial Guatemala—an understanding distinctly at odds with the prevailing view at the time he was writing and clearly based on his immersion in the archival documentation which makes that presence most plain—and then leading the reader utterly to dismiss their historical relevance by the end of the book. Not that he does so by simply erasing references to race and ethnicity from his analysis. Instead, he *replaces* certain of the "racial" labels he encounters in late-colonial documents, notably *mulato* and *pardo*, with others that do not connote African descent as directly, such as *mestizo* and *ladino*, even as elsewhere he is dismissing the significance of even these latter terms for understanding social relations. Subtly exclusive declarations like "[r]ace

mixture was the inevitable result of sexual union between Spanish or criollo males and Indian women” (195) further weaken any sense of connection between his briefly prominent but now disappearing “blacks” and reproductive processes.

What is perhaps most striking about this replacement of terminology is its explicit nature: the author quotes directly from documents in which the non-favored terms appear and then argues with and alters them. Such a curious practice is worthy of some extended analysis of its own. While several examples of this phenomenon are lost in the translated version because they appeared in the original’s endnotes, a number remain (109, 113, 180, 189). My favorite, found in the main text of the Spanish version, did not quite make the cut, however. In a discussion of the nature of social distinctions within the “middle strata,” Martínez Peláez argued not unreasonably (although, as was his habit, without any qualification whatsoever) for the significance of economic position as opposed to racial designation, eventually declaring “Es igual llamarlos mestizos, mulatos, pardos, castas o ladinos.”³ When considered in light of his own re-labeling practices this statement is more than a little ironic, and provides one case in which the translation does not to my mind achieve the goal of “harmony” with the original when it simply states “It is not important what we call them” (190).

Perhaps the most widely controversial feature of Martínez Peláez’s interpretation, though, has been his assessment of the “Indian” as entirely a colonial creation, and in essence nothing more than a victim even in resistance. Such assertions as “[f]rom the moment of first contact on, languages have constituted one aspect of colonial Indian identity” (285) and “Indian culture is an expression of the survival of oppression and servitude, right up to the present” (291) have sparked fierce condemnation from the generation of Maya nationalist intellectuals that arose during the violent decades following the book’s initial publication, as well as from the international scholars, often anthropologists, with whom those intellectuals have worked most closely. As the editors observe in their introduction, even a noted Guatemalan historian with roots in the post-1960s leftist circles for

³ Martínez Peláez, 341.

which the book became a near-sacred text has described Martínez Peláez's views in it as "undoubtedly a little racist" (xxxiv). But here, too, as in the case of his treatment of Africans and their descendants, the author's attention to the evidence often worked at cross purposes to the imperatives of his analytical framework, sometimes to the extent of producing statements diametrically opposed to the tenor of the declarations quoted above, and in terms no less absolute! Thus we have the striking observation that "Fuentes y Guzmán was well aware that native rituals were alive and well, and that Indians ... were immune, therefore, to spiritual conquest" (121) as well as a description of the persistence of native "fugitivism" throughout the colonial era, including the establishment of "thousands" of "makeshift huts and shacks" or *pajuides* in remote locations, an activity that "no amount of restitution or punishment could halt..." (270). Tensions of this sort between evidence and theory regularly spawn new research agendas.

It should also be noted that in some areas the book is simply unreliable as a guide to the evidence rather than merely misguided, according to critics, in its interpretation of the evidence. The significance of native demographic decline receives almost no attention, and the notion that criollos formed "one large family, a closed kinship group" (95) is highly misleading. The author minimizes the importance of involuntary African immigration to Guatemala, confining it largely to the sixteenth century when in fact it only reached its peak during the era of the Portuguese *asientos* (1595-1640), as notarial documents in the Archivo General de Centro América make clear (the actual dates of Thomas Gage's stay in Guatemala, mentioned above, were perhaps somewhat inconvenient to the author's argument since Gage frequently mentions the African presence). The book also suggests that free blacks and mulattos never owed tribute, ignores their role in colonial militias, and cites Fuentes y Guzmán to assert, incorrectly, that key villages in eastern Guatemala had no non-native inhabitants in the late seventeenth century. These and similar weaknesses of the sort that specialists are wont to point out pose a crucial challenge to any claim for the definitive nature of a work that has nonetheless been

instrumental in opening pathways by which other scholars have encountered the means to address them.

Many of the questions the book raised are as relevant now as when it was first published. The author's probing of the nature and stability of the Ladino category, while inattentive to shifts in the term's colonial usage and fraught with tensions between his class-oriented argument and evident inability to treat "racial" classifications as truly insignificant, was founded in a premise that animates key debates about the nature of Guatemalan society: "ladinization is a misconception based on the greatest lie of all: that Guatemalan society is divided into two 'cultural groups'—Indians and Ladinos" (272). Even when the book has only a little to say about an important topic, as in the area of gender relations, the analysis is never less than provocative: in a discussion of "race mixture" as narrowly defined in the quotation mentioned earlier, the author raised issues concerning the nature of sexual politics in a colonial society that continue to attract examination. The original work is irreplaceable as required reading for specialists, but this fine translation will allow a wider audience to appreciate not only its deeply engaged historical analysis, but also the manner in which Martínez Peláez's pronouncement on the ultimate value of Fuentes y Guzmán as the author of a key source may now be applied with as much justice to the writer of *La patria del criollo* himself: "We would do well to remember that people who reflect the era in which they live, who truly are representative of their times, are in general unaware of the full significance of their writings" (299). Those who already know the original, meanwhile, should not miss the translators' deft and imaginative take on the author's closing lines.