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Review/Reseña

Earle, Rebecca. *The Return of the Native: Indians and myth-making in Spanish America, 1810-1930*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Return of the Indian

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In 1991, Bolivian anthropologist Xavier Albó published the provocatively entitled essay “El retorno del Indio” in which he surveyed the reemergence of Indigenous organizations and movements in the Andes during the 1980s.¹ While in economic terms the 1980s was a “lost decade” for most of Latin America, it represented a period of tremendous gains for Indigenous peoples.² Subsequently, however, historians have criticized the

¹ Xavier Albó, “El retorno del Indio,” *Revista Andina* 9, no. 2 (December 1991): 299-345.

² Galo Ramón V., ed., *Actores de una década ganada: tribus, comunidades y campesinos en la modernidad* (Quito: COMUNIDEC, 1992).

short temporal frameworks of much of the anthropological and political scientist work on recent Indigenous politics. Rather than new, debates over Indigenous policies have deeper roots than these scholars often recognize.³

Rebecca Earle does not directly engage debates surrounding contemporary Indigenous politics in her book *The Return of the Native*, but she does provide a much deeper and very useful context for how Indigenous identities have been constructed over time. Except for a brief discussion in the epilogue, Earle does not consider how Indians have used this history. Rather, her focus is on how nineteenth-century white elites repeatedly reconstructed native histories to fit their own political purposes. To speak of a return is a misnomer, because Indians had never really left the national stage.

Earle reads this history through an extensive examination of nineteenth-century newspapers, pamphlets, and manuscripts. Using these sources, she examines how elites drew on cultural symbols, iconographies, and imaginings to construct a cultural nationalism that served their political purposes. In this broad ranging book, Earle moves seamlessly in her discussion between Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, and Ecuador. Rather than creating a simplified and generalized image, her broad readings result in a very complex depiction of diverse realities. Elites did not embrace one unified policy, but their views and actions varied over time and place depending on their immediate needs and concerns.

The post-Independence period was devastating for the aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas, arguably a worse time than the conquest. Without the paternalistic protection of the Spanish crown, creole elites were left free to prey on Indigenous peasants. The importation of liberal ideologies theoretically meant the erasure of racial boundaries, but in reality these ideas resulted in an entrenchment of exclusionary class structures. At the same time, however, creole leaders drew on the achievements of ancient civilizations to reject perceptions of American inferiority and to justify the creation of independent republics (22). Using

³ This is my argument in Marc Becker, *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

Indians to create a legitimate national past becomes a primary theme throughout the book. At first, elites depicted Spain as an evil stepmother while Indians were the true parents of the nation (37). This is represented in a return to Indigenous place names. New Spain, for example, becomes Mexico at Independence (48). Perhaps even more notably, the slave rebels who overthrew the French planter class in Saint Domingue returned to the native term “Haiti” for their island. Little of this nationalistic rhetoric, however, translated into support for Indigenous empowerment. A wide gulf separated a glorified Indigenous past from their brutal contemporary realities.

Earle is not the first, of course, to reflect on the fundamental disconnect between embracing a pre-conquest Indigenous history while dismissing the needs and concerns of their contemporary descendants. She builds on the pioneering work of others such as Cecilia Méndez’s essay “Incas Si, Indios No.”⁴ Earle repeatedly returns to the theme that elites were willing to embrace physically and chronologically distant Indians as a positive influence on the nation while depicting the Indigenous peoples around them in quite negative terms (184). Maya ruins, for example, gained important national significance for Guatemala, but they remained completely disconnected from the contemporary Maya (133). For nineteenth-century elites, Indians were an obstacle to the vision of the nation they sought to construct.

Embracing a glorified Indigenous past, however, was only one of several elite responses. Earle presents us with a very complex reading of the variations and intricacies in elite constructions of this discourse. She traces how over the course of the nineteenth century, conservative leaders proceeded full circle from a pro-Spanish to an anti-Spanish and back to a pro-Spanish perspective. Unlike the original creole elites who argued for Indigenous roots of the nation, subsequent conservatives embraced Spain as their mother. From this perspective, independence was the work of Spaniards and Indigenous peoples played no role in these events (98).

Earle then proceeds to examine the views of other nineteenth-

⁴Cecilia Méndez G., “Incas Si, Indios No: Notes on Peruvian Creole Nationalism and Its Contemporary Crisis,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 28, no. 1 (February 1996): 197-225.

century conservatives who did not completely dismiss the importance of Indigenous civilizations. They formed part of a creole ambition to convert the Indigenous past into an American version of classical antiquity that, as with Rome in Europe, could be accepted as part of a national history (125). Other conservatives argued that the Spanish conquest had improved the lot of Indigenous peoples, and if they had subsequently become an unfortunate and miserable people it was entirely the fault of misguided liberal reform policies (172). Throughout, Indians formed a passive part of a running debate among elites over the political uses of history, and competing visions over how to use history to form national identities. When it came to constructing these histories, elites did not speak with a single voice.

The lack of a unified elite discourse on the roles of Indigenous peoples in the making of the nation, Earle argues, is because it is integrally tied up in a search for both a personal and national identity, and identity politics are by their very nature contested terrains. Quite naturally, creole searches for a useable history would be a conflictive enterprise. Logically, Independence leaders would emphasize a pre-Columbian past in order to justify a break from Spain. But, particularly for conservative elites, their class interests were much more closely allied with the Spanish colonial system than the Indigenous peoples whom their policies left increasingly impoverished. Instead, they wished to paint their countries as white and European. As they became entirely disconnected from Indigenous peoples, it once again became safe to embrace Indigenous civilizations—not as part of their history, but as part of their past.⁵ Views on Indians varied depending on the needs, and the political uses that they could make of this history.

The book concludes with a final chapter on *indigenismo* as it emerged in the 1920s in Peru, Mexico, and Central America. The chapter is subtitled with the title of the book but now phrased as a question (“The Return of the Native?”), thereby subtly reminding us that Indigenous peoples had never really left the political realm. Largely focusing her discussion on the art forms rather than the legislation that flourished

⁵Edward Carr makes this very useful distinction between history and the past in *What is history?* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961).

during this period, Earle depicts *indigenismo* and its visions of the relationship between current Indigenous peoples and their past as a continuity of nineteenth-century elite attitudes (190). The 1921 centennial of Mexican independence, for example, became a celebration of Hispanism, with the conquistador Hernán Cortés now openly embraced as the father of the country (195). José Vasconcelos portrayed Indians as obsolete, as his celebration of *mestizaje* downplayed the role of Indians in the myth of nation building (206). In their place, creoles became the true natives of the nation (219).

A common perception is that interest in Indigenous culture and history emerged in Mexico in the aftermath of the 1910-1920 revolution. Earle explores, however, how the Porfiriato witnessed a growth of interest in archaeology that is commonly associated with the Mexican Revolution (140). Furthermore, not only did Mexican interest in the pre-conquest period predate the revolution, but the disconnect between the pre-conquest past and Indigenous present continued strongly into *indigenista* discourse (215). Despite the variations on elite attitudes that Earle presents throughout the book, a constant is that they willingly sacrificed Indigenous realities to serve their current political needs.

Underlying this work and somewhat understated is a disciplinary divide between history and archaeology. The split is often justified as one of sources. Historical studies typically begin with the arrival of the Spanish and written sources, whereas archaeologists examine the material culture of nonliterate peoples. Without writing, people allegedly could not have a history.⁶ Earle briefly touches on how nineteenth-century elites used this division to justify writing Indigenous peoples out of the history of the nation. Museums segregated antiquities from historical materials, with Indigenous materials relegated to a “pre-history” section that had little bearing on a national history. In Argentina, for example, no Indigenous artifacts were to be found in history exhibits because the elites had determined that there were no Indians in their country (156). Indians were part of a past that had little to do with their history, and certainly nothing

⁶See Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

to do with the present. This divide is not, however, a historical oddity. Until relatively recently, few historians would make Indigenous peoples the subjects of their studies, or if they did they would study them as peasants or workers.⁷ Indians were largely relegated to the realms of archaeology and anthropology, and scholars in those disciplines examined them as cultural curiosities rather than makers of a political history. Contemporary scholars are often as guilty as the nineteenth-century elites who Earle examines in this book for writing natives out of Latin American history.

⁷See, for example, Florencia E. Mallon, *The Defense of Community in Peru's Central Highlands: Peasant Struggle and Capitalist Transition, 1860-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), and Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990).