Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835 (review)

Jonathan Eastwood

The Americas, Volume 62, Number 4, April 2006, pp. 659-660 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2006.0063*

The Americas
62:4 April 2006, 659-707

Book Reviews

Liberty and Equality in Caribbean Colombia, 1770-1835. Aline Helg. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Pp. xiv, 363. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $59.95 cloth; $22.50 paper.

This book, following on the author's well-received *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (1995), contains some of the best historical writing on colonial and early independence Caribbean Colombia yet produced. Helg employs a highly useful comparative framework, and the reader is frequently shown points of convergence and divergence between developments in the region and other parts of the Americas, most notably Venezuela, the dominant Andean region in Colombia, Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti, among others. It is meticulously researched, and is sure to be widely read.

The book is open, however, to a couple of objections, and by far the most fundamental of these concerns the very framing of Helg's central questions: Why, she asks, "did Caribbean Colombian lower classes of color not collectively challenge the small white elite during this process [of early nation-formation]? Why did race not become an organizational category in the region? Why did the Caribbean Coast integrate into Andean Colombia without asserting its Afro-Caribbeanness?" (pp. 6-7). The third of these, which seems to presuppose an essentialized Afro-Caribbean identity, is plainly ahistorical. As Helg herself clearly sees elsewhere in the book, late colonial and early independence-era Caribbean Colombians of African descent did not adopt an Afro-Caribbean identity. The region's not asserting "its Afro-Caribbeanness" is a function of the fact that it did not *have* anything that we might call Afro-Caribbean identity: the assertion of identity of this sort is a prerequisite for its possession. One sees this problem repeat itself periodically throughout the text, such as when Helg argues that "the regional elite could not unite and overcome its provincialism to preside over the formation of a strong Caribbean entity" (p. 9). As her later analysis so well demonstrates, this may be in no small part because the regional elite did not *want* to do so, due to their own largely local concerns; it is not that they "could not" do so, it seems, but that they *did* not.

Helg's ahistoricism here seems to be closely tied to her own political views, which are made quite clear from the outset. The book begins with a mention of the

1991 constitution, approvingly noting that it "recognizes the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country, protects minorities, and acknowledges the existence of Indians in the nation by assigning two senatorial seats to the indigenous communities" (p. 2). This, she says, was a major improvement (though an incomplete one) on the 1886 constitution, which "denied diversity" (Ibid.). It is worth noting that this is a highly contestable characterization of the 1886 constitution. Some might counter that formal legal equality at the individual level does not deny diversity but upholds it. In any case, these are not historical questions, and readers might find Helg's all-too-readily-dispensed contemporary political judgments distracting.

It would be unfortunate, however, for a reader bothered by these sorts of issues to put the book down, because it is well worth reading. What the persistent reader finds is a detailed analysis of the local history of towns and the countryside in the region, and a sophisticated, multi-causal answer to Helg's three organizing questions. The most important factors identified include, among others: the continued resilience of local, hierarchically-organized communities dominated by whites; the lack of a well-developed system of communication; rivalries between local cities; "people of color's preference for improvisation and adaptive strategies of resistance" (p. 10), which Helg sees as partially a function of the relatively high percentage of women among slaves and free persons of African descent in the region; possibilities for social advancement for individuals of African descent through various institutional channels, such as certain colonial militias and, more generally, the very "fuzziness" of racial distinctions in the region; and, perhaps most importantly, that geographical and political circumstances offered more opportunities for "exit" than "voice" (to make use of Albert Hirschmann's well-known categories) for Caribbean-Colombians of African descent. "[I]n the end," Helg writes, "the most abiding reason why the Caribbean region avoided large-scale social conflict and remained within New Granada was the continuing existence of vast uncontrolled hinterlands and frontiers as well as an unguarded littoral offering viable alternatives to rebellious and free-spirited individuals" (p. 262).

This fine book will be read with interest not only by historians and other social scientists concerned with the colonial and early-national history of Caribbean Colombia, but by researchers on nationalism and ethnicity more generally in the region.

Harvard University JONATHAN EASTWOOD
Cambridge, Massachusetts

ETHNOHISTORY/INDIGENOUS POLITICS

Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn From It. By Robert Borofsky. Berkeley: University of California press, 2005. Pp. xx, 372. Illustrations. Map. References. Index. $49.95 cloth: $19.95 paper.

The Yanomami Controversy continues unabated in anthropological circles. In 2005 the American Anthropological Association voted to rescind its own earlier