Exploraciones/Explorations

After the Nueva Historia:
Recent Trends in Peruvian Historiography

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The 1970s were a decade of revolution in Peruvian historiography. In that decade, a handful of scholars re-thought, re-wrote, and to some extent, re-shaped much of Peru’s history. In 1980, a compendium entitled Nueva historia general del Perú claimed that the recent work of historians and sociologists such as Alberto Flores Galindo, Heraclio Bonilla, Manuel Burga, Ernesto Yepes and Julio Cotler:

No sólo ha logrado superar la perspectiva metodológica y políticamente conservadora en la cual se mantenía la mayor parte [de la producción histórica], sino que se ha convertido en una suerte de ‘disciplina piloto’ dentro de las ciencias sociales, en una disciplina que renueva y profundiza nuestro conocimiento del pasado y lo proyecta fecundamente sobre la actualidad.

Whereas the old history had been little more than ‘un inconducente catálogo de gobernantes y obras públicas, de batallas y fechas y actos heroicos’, the new history was re-examining history ‘con instrumentos de análisis y procedimientos científicos que ignoró la historia anterior’ (Lumbreras et al. 1980, no page number).

Both global and local factors can help account for the emergence of the Nueva Historia. Globally, the Algerian War, the Vietnam War, and above all, the Cuban Revolution radicalised young people around the world, particularly students. A rejection of the status quo filtered through into academic disciplines, even to Peru’s notoriously conservative history departments. In Peru, the growth of the middle class, the expansion of university education in the 1950s and 1960s, the short-lived guerrilla movements of the mid 1960s, and the reforms introduced by the Velasco government are only some of the factors that contributed to the emergence of a generation of scholars with new perspectives and agendas. The New Historians were representative of a society undergoing profound changes. Many, like Nelson Manrique, Heraclio Bonilla, Manuel Burga and Wilfredo Kapsoli were provincianos. Some, like Margarita Giesecke, Piedad Pareja and Carmen Rosa Balbi, were women. Significantly, a number had been trained in other disciplines, particularly sociology, and were
not, strictly speaking, historians. Foreign historians, too, participated in this process, drawn to Peru, as Rory Miller has argued, by ‘a quite unique style of military government’ (1987, 7). There they found plentiful, and largely unused archival material, as well as a stimulating intellectual (and political) environment.

The New Historians were influenced by an eclectic mix of imported theoretical perspectives, including Althusserian Marxism, the Annales school, English social history, particularly the works of E. P. Thompson, and, perhaps most significantly, structuralism and dependency theory. At the same time, they found in the works of José Carlos Mariátegui an original and largely autochthonous explanatory framework of Peruvian history and society. Foreign scholars as well were attracted by Mariátegui’s singular form of Marxism. To be sure, though Mariátegui provided the ideological foundations, the Nueva Historia also drew on a strong academic historical tradition, begun by Jorge Basadre, and later developed in the 1950s and 1960s by Pablo Macera and others. By the time the Nueva Historia began to bear its first fruits, the reaction against traditional historiography was already underway. Not all New Historians were Marxists. However most worked from a Marxist perspective (Macera 1977, lxi) and some combined their scholarly pursuits with active militancy. For these scholars the revolution that they were effecting within academia could not be dissociated from the revolution at large: the new history was a step towards revolution and a revolution in itself. Significantly, though they favoured similar theoretical approaches, the New Historians did not share necessarily the same views. The now famous debate between Favre, Bonilla, Manrique and Mallon on peasant nationalism during the War of the Pacific is a case in point.3 Perhaps just as important, though most scholars were of the left, they were divided into a myriad of political parties and factions. In the tense context of the late 1970s, political rivalries could easily spill over into academic and indeed personal enmity.

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse the themes explored by the Nueva Historia in any detail. However, it is worth noting that most New Historians intended their research to contribute to a profound social transformation. Heraclio Bonilla pointed out in the introduction to Guano y burguesía: ‘No creo que el oficio de historiador consista en dialogar con los muertos. Al contrario. Es un oficio profundo y genuinamente comprometido con los dramas y las crisis de su sociedad.’ He added that he hoped that his book would lead to further research: ‘sólo así será posible ir construyendo en el Perú una conciencia histórica que sintetice las vicisitudes previas de su sociedad y que inspire y aliente a sus hombres en el combate cotidiano por una historia distinta’ (Bonilla 1974, 19). Indeed, many topics were chosen for their political, indeed revolutionary, relevance. Thus Alberto Flores Galindo’s analysis of Lima society at the end of the colonial period concluded: ‘En cierta manera, el argumento de este libro podría resumirse negativamente. Las circunstancias que explican por qué no tuvo lugar una revolución’ (Flores Galindo 1984, 235). Several studies on the early twentieth century converge on the 1930s in an attempt to explain how such an apparently revolutionary historical conjuncture failed to produce a revolution.4

In the mid to late 1980s, the new history faced a number of challenges. On the one hand, the economic crisis in general and hyperinflation in particular
were beginning to undermine the capacity of Peruvian historians to undertake research. Many left their university positions or were forced to combine their academic pursuits with jobs in other areas. Some joined the economic migratory flow to the North. Yet others became consultants in NGOs. At the same time and no less important, the internal war between the Shining Path and the Peruvian state made historical research a dangerous pursuit. Mark Thurner’s original intention to carry out ethnographic and oral history research in the Huaraz region was thwarted by the ‘series of political assassinations, nightly bombings, power outages, armed attacks and counter attacks in several peasant communities, and the temporary presence of counterinsurgency patrols [which] combined to produce a pervasive sense of fear and suspicion’ (Thurner 1997, ix). Though Thurner remained in Peru, many foreign scholars were, justifiably, frightened away from research, though it should be noted that some, disillusioned by the failure of the Velasco experiment, had by the mid 1980s already moved on. For Peruvian scholars the war added to the difficulties brought about by the economic crisis. However the biggest challenge faced by the Nueva Historia came with the collapse of the bipolar world and its impact on the Peruvian left. The crisis of the left coincided with the death, in 1990, of Alberto Flores Galindo, perhaps the most innovative and influential New Historian, and unleashed a critical re-examination of the foundations and raison d’être of the Nueva Historia.

The texts I examine below are recent examples (published in the last ten years) of the ongoing assessment of the achievements and limitations of the Nueva Historia. I should stress that this article is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the recent historical literature on Peru. It is not a review essay. I merely wish to point to some directions taken of late by historians working on Peru and to these studies’ relation to the Nueva Historia. I have restricted this survey to the republican period. Peru’s colonial historiography has evolved differently to republican historiography and the impact of the Nueva Historia has been experienced differently. I must stress that the new scholarship is not the product of a neat break with the Nueva Historia. Far from being unitary or static, the Nueva Historia was marked by a varied and dynamic scholarship, which resulted in increasingly sophisticated formulations and path-breaking debates. In this sense, the Nueva Historia was characterised by a ‘permanent revision’. Indeed, some of the current ‘revisionists’, like Florencia Mallon, were New Historians. Others, like Nelson Manrique (also a New Historian), probably do not see themselves as revisionists. Whereas the advent of the Nueva Historia signalled a clear caesura with traditional or conservative historiography, the recent scholarship is engaged in a dialogue with the Nueva Historia, often simply fine-tuning previous arguments, although sometimes providing important re-interpretations.

A key theme in the new historiography, and one that engages directly with the Nueva Historia, is the question of historical agency. In its crudest form, the Nueva Historia placed great emphasis on dependency as an explanatory variable of historical processes. Peruvian history was interpreted as the inevitable product and corollary of capitalist development at the Centre. The Peruvian elite, often portrayed as monolithic, was seen as a mere agent or appendage of the interests of European or North American bourgeoisies. Similarly, though the New Historians brought the subaltern to the fore of historical analysis, the
participation of workers and peasants in historical processes was often interpreted as a product of forces over which they had only limited control and, as such, were largely unable to influence.

These dependency-based interpretations have been challenged on a number of fronts. Historians have shown that the outlook and actions of the elite could vary substantially from the dictates of dependency theory. Older interpretations of Peru’s elite, as offered by Bourricaud (1969), Gilbert (1982) and Miller (1982), are subject to reappraisal. Gootenberg (1989 and 1993) and Mc Evoy (1994) have exploded the myth that nineteenth century Peru was devoid of an elite capable of formulating national projects. Similarly, Quiroz (1989 and 1993) Reaño and Vásquez (1988), and Felipe Portocarrero (1995) have shown that the Peruvian elite was larger, more diversified, and entrepreneurial than previously assumed. Intra-elite competition was rife, both on the economic and political fronts. Power was rarely concentrated in one group. Peralta’s (1991) superb study of Cuzco between 1826 and 1854 shows how the Indian tribute was used by the central state to undermine local political power. Recently, Miller (1999) has laid the ground for future research on Peruvian business history, a still largely neglected area, which hopefully will be picked up by historians. Similarly, the history of elite political parties, particularly the Civilista Party, has been re-interpreted from a perspective that emphasises the popular participation in the parties’ formative period (Mc Evoy 1994 and 1997). Recent re-interpretations of nineteenth century elections (Gabriella Chiaramonte 1995; Vincent Peloso 1996) have shown that elections were not as politically irrelevant or as devoid of popular participation as assumed by earlier studies.

Similarly, recent studies show that the subaltern were neither prisoners of their position in the international division of labour nor passive observers of political transformations. Drawing on an interpretative framework influenced by Habermas’ concept of the ‘public sphere’, Walker (1999) and Chambers (1999) show that rural communities and urban ‘plebeians’ in Cuzco and Arequipa took an active part in shaping early republican caudillo politics. According to Méndez (1991), Iquichano peasants from Ayacucho fought on the royalist camp during the wars of Independence to protect the economic and political rights granted to them by the colonial state, not, as has been suggested, as a result of manipulation or ‘alienation’. Blanchard (1992), Aguirre (1993), and Hünefeldt (1994) show that slaves played an active role in abolition by resorting to a number of strategies of resistance that gradually helped erode slavery. For the latter nineteenth century, both Mallon (1995) and Thurner (1997) find ‘alternative nationalisms’ and ‘Andean republicano politics’ that undermine previous conclusions about peasants’ undeveloped consciousness and emphasise popular Andean political cultures. All these studies point to the existence of competing notions of citizenship and nation, alternatives to the largely exclusionary national projects of the elite.

Moreover, recent scholarship has helped revise and expand certain topics first developed by the Nueva Historia. Regional history, often linked to the study of Peru’s insertion into the world economy via its highly regionalised export commodities, is perhaps one of the strongest legacies of the Nueva Historia. Recent studies have expanded its study to previously neglected regions such as Chachapoyas (Nugent 1997), Piura (Apel 1996), Ayacucho (Galdo Gu-

In addition to regional history, other topics developed by the Nueva Historia have received renewed attention. A number of new studies on María de la Cruz, a favourite subject of the Nueva Historia, dwell on dimensions of the Amauta’s life and works that have been largely overlooked, such as his childhood (Rodríguez Pastor 1995), his role in the 1917 Lima cemetery scandal (Stein 1997) and the roots of his indigenist thinking (Leibner 1999). Of late, the study of race and racism, and ethnicity, often relegated to secondary importance by the Nueva Historia’s insistence on class analysis, has benefited from studies by Manrique (1993, 1995a and 1999), Poole (1997) and de la Cadena (2000). The history of immigration has similarly received renewed attention. In addition to a number of studies on European immigration (Worral 1990; Marcone 1992; Bonfiglio 1996), historians have paid increasing attention to the role of Asian immigration. Rodríguez Pastor’s book on Chinese workers (1989) is a worthy companion to Stewart’s earlier study (1951). For relatively obvious reasons, the election of Fujimori in 1990 and the centenary of Japanese immigration in 1999, the 1990s have seen a flurry of new studies of Japanese immigration and Nikkei history (Lausent-Herrera 1991; Thorndike 1996; Fukumoto 1997; Rocca Torres 1997), which complement earlier studies by Gardiner (1975) and Morimoto (1979). Finally Marcos Cueto (1989, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997 and, with Lossio, 1999) has almost single-handedly introduced the study of science, technology and medicine to Peruvian historiography.

Three recently published single-volume histories provide syntheses of both the Nueva Historia and the more recent scholarship. Manrique (1995b) is particularly strong in his portrayal of the regionalised character of Peru’s republican history. Cueto and Contreras’s book (1999) is intended as a textbook for first year undergraduates. It is a timely effort to bridge the gap that exists between the monographs presented above, and their methodological and historiographical advances, and the general histories available to Peruvian university students. Of the three, Klarén (2000) is the more ambitious and complete, covering the pre-Hispanic, colonial and republican periods right up to Fujimori’s re-election in 1995. Like Cueto and Contreras, Klarén incorporates much of the recent literature effectively and is likely to become the standard reference book for some years to come.
This brief overview of recent developments in Peruvian historiography points to two general conclusions. First, unlike the Nueva Historia, the more recent historians do not represent a historical school or intellectual movement. Little binds these studies. To some extent they share an overt or implicit rejection of analyses that prioritise class and Marxism over other analytical categories and theoretical perspectives. However, this rejection is rarely assumed as a *prise de position* but rather as a methodological step. Second, whereas the Nueva Historia made its *raison d’être* and objective transparent – to challenge conservative history and contribute to a radical transformation of Peruvian society – what fuels the recent historiography is harder to pin down. If the New Historians chose their topics of research for their revolutionary significance, indeed, potential, what criteria do the more recent historians employ to choose their topics? In part, the absence of a single overarching logic is a product of the professionalisation of history in Peru, a process in which the New Historians played a key role. New Historians such as Flores Galindo, Bonilla and Burga taught many of the new scholars in Peruvian universities in the 1980s and 1990s. It is also a product of the absence of a politically charged context such as that which characterised the late 1970s and early 1980s, when combining historical scholarship and militancy was deemed both natural and necessary.

Nevertheless, in spite of the largely de-politicized context in which the new scholarship is being produced, some historians, particularly Peruvians but also some foreigners, share the Nueva Historia’s belief that history has a social or civic, if perhaps not political or revolutionary, role to play. In this sense, they conceive of their *métrie* in terms that would seem alien to many European and US historians. They work under the assumption that their research is not only relevant to modern Peru, but may actually hold one of the keys to making the country a better place for them and others to live in. Cueto, for one, hopes that his history of epidemics will contribute ‘a fortalecer los elementos de solidaridad, integración y equidad que permitan superar la fragmentación y la desigualdad que atraviesan al Perú’ (1997, 226). Mc Evoy sees the relevance of her study in strictly contemporary terms:

Los persistentes intentos por hegemonizar un discurso neo-liberal en la región además de estar reduciendo, en aras de la eficiencia, el campo de acción del Estado, está también, paradójicamente, privatizando a la sociedad civil. El establecimiento de una conexión indisoluble entre democracia y ciudadanía además de permitirnos evaluar muchos de los modelos políticos vigentes, puede colaborar en dar luces en torno a la difícil relación entre sociedad civil y poder político (1997, 444).

Fukumoto ends the introduction to her book on the Japanese in Peru thus: ‘Con el presente libro esperamos contribuir al conocimiento de este grupo en particular y de las relaciones interétnicas en general. Ello con la esperanza de tener un Perú más integrado, donde los diferentes grupos que conforman su variada población sean respetados como peruanos sin importar su origen o color’ (1997, 30).

Where does Peruvian historiography go from here? There are a number of obvious areas of research that remain largely unexplored. I will refrain from presenting an elaborate list and restrict my conclusions to two suggestions and
a provocation. First, the suggestions. In critiquing dependency-based approaches, the new historiography has helped endogenise, to put it one way, the participation of the elite and the subaltern in Peruvian history. It is no longer possible to represent either those at the top or those at the bottom as mere pawns in a game of crude historical determinism. However, there have been few attempts to endogenise the state. Clearly, as many of the recent monographs show, historical interpretations of the state as an agent of the oligarchy are no longer sufficient. In light of the present radical state-unbuilding promoted by the Fujimori administration, historical studies of the Peruvian state would be particularly welcome and may help complement, or simply historicise, the studies offered by political scientists (Stepan 1978). The second suggestion is not to forget the twentieth century. As a perusal of the recent literature shows, the nineteenth century has been particularly favoured of late. The reasons for this merit discussion, albeit in a different forum. It is significant that of the four *Cambridge History of Latin America* chapters, Bonilla’s chapter on Peru (and Bolivia) between independence and the War of the Pacific is the most out of date from a historiographical point of view (see Bonilla 1985, Kla-rén 1986, Bertram 1991 and Cotler 1991). This is neither because it was written earlier than the other chapters nor because it is somehow flawed, but simply because the period it covers has been subject to the bulk of revisionist writing. The twentieth century moreover has only been studied selectively. To point simply to political history, there are no studies of the Benavides, Prado, or Odría presidencies to match those of the Billinghurst (Blanchard 1977, Huiza 1998), Sánchez Cerro (Ciccarielli 1969; Stein 1980) and Bustamante y Rivero (Portocarrero 1983; Haworth 1992) administrations. Similarly, the Leguía oncenio has yet to receive proper attention (see Irurozqui 1994). A historical, rather than political or hagiographical, reassessment of APRA is surely a marketable proposition?

Turning to the provocation, the changes undergone by Peruvian historiography are very clearly the product of broader processes. One obvious trend is the shift from French to Anglo-Saxon influence in Latin American historiography. The shift is both methodological and practical. Whereas many of the New Historians, such as Bonilla and Flores Galindo, were trained in France, today, Peruvian historians, such as Méndez, Aguirre, Mc Evoy and Cueto to name a few, are reading for their doctorates in US universities. The implication of this shift is not straightforward and may not in itself be all that significant. For one thing, all four historians mentioned were first trained in Peruvian universities. Indeed many of their first publications are the outcome of masters’ degrees undertaken in Peru. Nevertheless, it is clear that US historical trends are becoming increasingly influential in Peruvian historical scholarship (although this may be less true in provincial universities). Many of the studies examined above are the product of this influence. This in itself is not a bad thing. Indeed, a deepening of this trend will hopefully result in better research in at least two areas that remain largely unexplored in Peru: gender history and the new labour history. In Peru, the history of women and gender is yet to receive the attention that Mexicanists have lavished upon it. Recent contributions by Denegri (1996), Zegarra *et al.* (1999) and Hünefeldt (1999) are encouraging, but as Zegarra admits of her edited volume: ‘el libro evidencia la relativa juventud del enfoque de género en la investigación histórica’ (Zegarra
Similarly, the ‘new labour history’ revolution has hardly registered in Peru. Despite recent revisionist studies (Hirsch, 1997) and an excellent study of white-collar workers (Parker 1998), for the most part labour history remains under ‘the rule of acronyms’, and there are no studies to match those of Winn (1989) or James (1988) for Chile and Argentina. Yet the growing influence of US historical trends carries some risks. First, we may begin to see a divergence between Peruvian history written by US or US-based historians and Peruvian history written in Peru. Such a divergence is perhaps already an aspect of Mexican historiography. The divergence owes much to the fact that much of US-based Mexican historiography has become largely self-referential. At it most extreme, this process amounts to a form of academic colonialism. Mexico serves as a source of raw material which US-based historians mine assiduously. However, the historiography that results, particularly when it is strongly influenced by cliometric or postmodern approaches, serves to feed academic debates within US universities but is seldom intended to influence the writing of Mexican history in Mexico (though it may unintentionally do so). This is not the situation in Peru, nor perhaps is it in the case of Mexico in such crude terms, but the potential for self-reference and academic colonialism exists. In addition, a deepening of US academic influence may lead to a narrowing of the research agenda. Indeed, the influence of US historical trends is not restricted to offering alternative interpretations or introducing new analytical methods but extends to setting research agendas. Again this is not a bad thing in itself, especially when, as the current batch of new research shows, those research agendas produce excellent results. However to the extent that research agendas are largely set by trends within US academia and, in part, by the demands of the US academic job market, research topics and the approaches and techniques employed risk becoming increasingly narrow or being subsumed within a single overarching logic, such as, to give one example, postcolonial studies.

In conclusion, this brief presentation of recent trends in Peruvian historiography should be the cause of moderate optimism. Peruvian historiography has survived the challenges of the political and economic crises of the 1980s and the collapse of the paradigms that sustained the Nueva Historia. Though much remains to be done, the recent revisionism has helped to re-invigorate Peruvian historiography, while contributing to a necessary appraisal of the achievements and limitations of the Nueva Historia. The process has led to superior syntheses, which set new standards and will help raise the general level of historiographical debate. Significantly, many historians continue to see the study and practice of history as more than simple academic pursuits. Though revolution is no longer the objective, the idea that history has a role to play in social change remains alive. To the extent that Peruvian society continues to be characterised by deep social inequality and mass poverty, the social engagement of Peruvian historians is hardly surprising. The social role, indeed responsibility, of the historian is as relevant today as it ever was.

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**Notes**

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1999 SLAS Conference. I am grateful to the symposium participants and to Malcolm Deas, Rafael Drinot, Alan Knight, Nelson Manrique, José Luis Rénique, and the editorial board of ERLACS for their comments and suggestions. The usual caveats apply.

2. To be sure, provincianos started to revolutionise academia as early as the 1900s. See Marisol de la Cadena (1998).

3. For an ‘update’ on this debate see Part III of Stern (1987).


5. On the other hand, the war created new opportunities for research. ‘Senderology’ became a bandwagon that many could not resist joining, including foreign scholars.

6. See the debate around Flores Galindo’s ‘testimony’ in Flores Galindo *et al.* (1991).

7. See also the articles in Portocarrero, Cáceres and Tapia (1995).

8. I am grateful to Nelson Manrique and José Luis Rénique for pointing this out to me.

9. However, Parodi (1986), which deals with the 1980s, comes close. The quotation comes from Knight (1984).

10. See the recent debate on Mexican cultural history in *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79:2 (1999).

**Bibliography**


