

Making the Nation, Enforcing the State: National Politics' Rendezvous with History

O. Hugo Benavides

- *Gabriel García Moreno and Conservative State Formation in the Andes*, by Peter Henderson. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.
- *La patria del criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala*, by Severo Martínez Peláez. Edited and introduced by W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz; translated by Susan Neve and W. George Lovell. London: Duke University Press, 2009.
- *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*, by Nick Nesbitt. London: University of Virginia Press, 2008.
- *Uruguay's José Batlle y Ordoñez: The Determined Visionary, 1915-1917*, by Milton Vanger. London: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2010.

The barrio's boundaries is our own little nation.
Derek Walcott/Paul Simon, *The Capeman*

'Mi pluma lo mató' (My pen killed him). As an Ecuadorian I grew up hearing this phrase constantly, and without a doubt, every citizen has had it embedded into their psyche by an early age. It is attributed to the writer Juan Montalvo when he learned of the assassination of the Ecuadorian president (and dictator to some) Gabriel García Moreno on 6 August 1875. This phrase highlights the essential relationship between the written word and politics. In Latin America the power embodied by written works contained in literature and history are not considered less than the more immediate engagement of political action. This understanding of the organic link between history and contemporary politics is a life lesson that no (neo)colonial subject can ever forget or afford to ignore in their lifetime. Perhaps because of this, education in the colonies has always been better rounded than that offered in the colonizing centres, where one can afford to believe that one is at the centre of history. In this respect all four books considered here do a good job of exposing the fallacy that Europe and the United States each believe that they are at the centre of the march of history. Equally important, the four texts express a biting knowledge of the role of history in deciding national political outcomes and one's daily survival. And even though poverty and inadequate resources of countries like Ecuador, Haiti, Guatemala and Uruguay define the limited access to education, and even literacy, of the general population, nobody would disregard their historic knowledge or, even less, ignore their predictive value in defining the nation-state's (and therefore one's own) political and personal outcome.

Peter Henderson's treatment of the life and times of Gabriel García Moreno probes the power of history in defining a nation-state's contemporary life. Even though García Moreno was assassinated over a century ago, his legacy still looms

large over the Ecuadorian polity and over all those that are invested in the future of this small nation. Henderson rightfully points out that to support or hate García Moreno's vision of a strong conservative Andean nation says more about one's contemporary national political affiliations than about one's sense of historical discourse; or rather, that history is very much about political commitment, and that to say otherwise is only a lie afforded by living at the centre of the imperial mindset. García Moreno was already of a committed frame of mind when as a young man he stated that he no longer wanted to study history but rather to make it. And as with most personal statements he was unaware of how truly prophetic this avowal would turn out to be. Although he failed miserably (and perhaps to the country's benefit) in making Ecuador an orthodox Catholic stronghold populated by 'superior people' (i.e., the French), the strength of his vision coalesced groups rallying for and against his national policies that came to define the politics of the nation until well into the twenty-first century. Henderson is right in pointing out that this conservative approach, unlike the more progressive liberal agenda, has received much less scholarly attention, and that for a more realistic understanding of the continent, a nuanced analysis of García Moreno's contribution, as one of the most coherent conservative models outlined, proves essential. Of course, the irony is that the liberals have done what García Moreno wanted but failed to do: they offered cheap American labour and raw resources to the hungry European and North American markets. Over the last century and a half, these markets would continue to underdevelop the continent from behind a democratic façade of mutual sovereignty.

This particular relationship between national/local politics and global capitalism is even more explicitly outlined in Nick Nesbitt's theoretical biography of the Haitian revolution. Unlike the report by the French Régis Debray (2004) and many of the sensational first-world media stories produced after Haiti's recent devastating earthquake, Nesbitt is not out to blame the small country for its crippling political situation. On the contrary, the author attempts to assess why the Western superpowers still fear such a diminutive nation-state and project their own guilt upon the courageous inhabitants of this island. In keeping with incisive historical readings of the Haitian revolution, from C.L.R. James' times to today, Nesbitt argues that becoming the first free Black nation in the Americas was a crime that has not been forgotten or forgiven. In this sense, Haiti has yet to fulfil its historical calling, since the revolution that took place in 1804 is by far the most ambitious and democratic one to have ever taken place in the Western hemisphere. The Haitian revolution surpassed both those of France and the incipient United States in ideological scope and geographical framing. And again, this theoretical lucidity is something that has been hard to swallow and impossible to forget for the old colonial masters. Nesbitt persuasively and concisely argues that the Haitian revolution succeeded where the French revolution failed. The Haitian uprising provided a declaration of human rights for all men, not constrained by racial prejudice and/or economic considerations. Again, as a colonial entity, Haitians were in a much better position to truly see themselves and the empire. After all, the problem with being in control of the political situation (as the French were) is that you also have so much more at stake, and the fear of losing it slowly begins to blur your historical vision. Nesbitt also rightfully points out that our historical (mis)treatment of

Haiti is related to our unwillingness to deal with its revolutionary proposal. Therefore, our reticence towards the small nation-state, catapulted into existence two hundred years ago, says more about our capitalist forms of expansion than it does of any limitations regarding Haiti's national character. The reality, argues Nesbitt, is that the Haitian revolution is far from over. There are still ways to go before true equality (for all men and women!) is fulfilled. Because of this Haiti still reflects the horrible wound that the West continuously projects upon all its neo-colonial subjects. It is because of this historical reality, as a lived-in experience and not as a dead academic subject, that 'what we think of as Haiti is right here around us everyday' (Nesbitt 2008, 196).

All four works express this immediacy and power of history, and of the written word as something far from being past. The historical and theoretical analysis of one's national history is the only way to make sense of many personal lives being communally lived in 'histories not of our making'. And just as Nesbitt eloquently elaborates the theoretical underpinnings expressed in the local political struggle of Haiti at the turn of the nineteenth century, the translation of Severo Martínez Peláez's *La patria del criollo* offers a similar insight into the colonial structure that made Guatemala, and the rest of the Americas, conform to crippling forms of political and economic oppression.

Susan Neve, W. George Lovell and Christopher Lutz's translation of (and introduction to) Martínez Peláez's opus also emphasizes history's political contribution. This work, originally published four decades ago, has proved to be a powerful analysis of Guatemala and an incisive contribution to understanding how centuries of European capitalism (i.e., greed) have contributed to making the Central American nation-state a mere storehouse for global markets. The work is insightful at varying levels, including its premise that history is far from being something obsolete for mere academic perusal, but instead is something dear, personal and alive that is essential to fuelling a people's soul and livelihood. Martínez Peláez's own life reads as that of the ideal Latin American scholar, in which present and past are organically integrated, and, far from being removed from the uneducated masses, his work allows him to feel fully integrated into the larger vision of the nation. This particular form of political insight, again, is one consolidated in the colonies and in conversation with, but not trapped within, the theoretical confines of the first world. It was this transnational conversation between different parts of the Americas and Europe (Martínez Peláez lived both in Mexico and Spain) which allowed him to offer a much more varied picture of Guatemala, one beyond that of simple victimization. For the author, Guatemala is also a central player on the global scene and, like most American nation-states, has had to play the market under totally unfair conditions. But despite this harrowing colonial legacy and the devastating experience of modern forms of genocide and racial oppression, Guatemalans have nevertheless been able to provide a life for their children and, most importantly, build a viable and proud national identity. It is precisely this particular form of understanding history and the nation (or nation-making) that makes the translation of this opus such an important contribution to scholarship in English.

In an academic setting of often rarefied journals and specialization, it is quite refreshing to see enduring scholarship that seeks to break down disciplinary walls and scholarly hierarchies, truly looking to engage with the life of the mind and the

political survival of whole national communities. It would be too hopeful to imagine a majority of the North American or European academies investing in similar projects, because that in itself would demand an academic re-structuring that universities are unwilling (and perhaps even unable) to fully explore. However, *La patria del criollo* possesses exactly that transformative power of scholarship. It reminds us that power does not lie in official rhetoric, academic accomplishments or even in book sales, but rather in the capacity to understand the full range of the written word and the ways in which these historical inscriptions are lived out daily in our bodies (and souls). If politics, as García Moreno understood it, is another way of making history, then history, as the Popular Memory Group (1982) espouses, is another way of doing politics. To this degree, instead of feigning a political neutrality that is as detrimental as it is non-existent, it is more realistic to assess the power of history over us as national subjects and to commit our energies to understanding how this history came to be, and is being made, even unwillingly, by us every single day. In this manner, I believe that it would be correct (as Nesbitt argues) to see Martínez Peláez's contribution as an actual extension of the Haitian revolution. The Haitian revolutionary legacy is still waiting for us to fulfil its terrible consequences; terrible because it would bring the present historical conditions to an end, and for the powers that be, that would prove to be a devastating reality.

In a similar sense, the work of Milton I. Vanger also expresses this same long-term scholarly passion and commitment. The author has been working on the life and times of Uruguay's statesman José Batlle y Ordoñez for over four decades. In this latest book he concentrates on two years of the political leader's life, from 1915 to 1917. Although *Uruguay's José Batlle y Ordoñez*, out of the four books under consideration here, is the most encyclopaedic and useful for those interested in Uruguay's political republican history, it still shares several of the points highlighted above. For one, it seriously engages the question of historical production, particularly the manner in which one larger-than-life personality (such as García Moreno, or Batlle y Ordoñez himself) interacts with extensive social networks at local, regional and global levels to carry out an individual political vision. And even though these two historical figures represent opposite extremes of the ideological spectrum, they continue to provide important insights into the way in which history, ideology and shifting coalitions can endow national formations with pervasive legacies. Thus, Vanger's analysis provides an incredibly detailed case study of one such powerful figure among the hundreds of others that have permeated the Latin American political scene.

What are the historical mechanisms that have allowed strong patriarchal figures to dominate the national political scene? In many instances these mechanisms have even enabled (as in the case of Toussaint in Haiti) these *caudillos* to take upon themselves the future of the nation, and in that sense control the state to enforce their own political vision; one that is always embedded and permeated by a strong sense of historical knowledge. The strong *caudillos* analysed in all four books (García Moreno, Toussaint, Martínez Peláez, and Batlle y Ordoñez) are paralleled by the recent development of strong progressive presidents throughout South America. As Oliver Stone (2009) recently elaborated in his controversial documentary film about South American politics, the leaders of Venezuela (Hugo Chávez), Bolivia (Evo Morales) and Brazil (Lula da Silva) reinforce the importance of a

historical structure that seems to favour strong patriarchal tendencies. To this degree, it is less an issue of ideological preferences than it is larger historical discourses that influence the structure and style of national imaginings on the continent.

Of course, this highlights larger questions of hegemonic processes and political participation, particularly the manner in which the act of state formation is implicated in the ultimate impoverishment of most of the American continent's citizens. The work of Alonso (1988), Joseph and Nugent (1994), as well as Silverblatt (1987) have succinctly elaborated how the struggle for hegemony is far from being a done deal or a secret agenda ready to be overturned. Rather, this scholarship has provocatively elaborated how the formation of the state is driven by the constant negotiation of hegemony, even though this might appear not to be the case at all, or at the very least, appear as though the struggle was occurring elsewhere, with the state acting as a mere official façade of itself (Abrams 1988).

In their own manner, all four books outline distinct forms of state formation which, along with burgeoning forms of nation-making, illustrate the struggle for hegemony. It is also a process that continues to this day, and can be seen, for example, in Stone's work, in the writing of this review itself, and in the very premise that researching Latin American history is a worthwhile endeavour. Therefore, whether writing against the state as in the case of Ecuador, or demanding the actual application of a universal human rights agenda in Haiti, or developing the link between historical processes and contemporary oppression as in Martínez Peláez's work about Guatemala, or spelling out the passion that fuelled Batlle's political life in Uruguay, all are hegemonic processes that are far from being monolithic or predictable. They are ambiguous signs that should be read and appreciated within a vast cultural flux.

Hegemony is far from being a finished cultural product; rather, it is culture-in-the-making. And each of these works provides insightful ways for understanding how this culture-in-the-making has ambivalent progressions that can, and have, developed in ways that are as dynamic as they are surprising. Who would have thought that a fallen conservative leader from the late 1800s would continue to hold sway over the minds and hearts of Ecuadorians? Or that a revolution that took place in 1804 in one of the smallest French colonies would still disturb us to such a degree that we must either look away or find ways of blaming Haiti for our own shortcomings and forms of inhumanities? Perhaps this is also where the great Latin American literary traditions, as pointed out by Juan Montalvo (who killed with his pen), intervene in the historical formation of the continent. Several centuries of great American writers have fervently assessed the manner in which history and culture are continuously flipping significations, thereby ultimately pointing out the on-going historical conundrum of the continent. This same literary desire, I would argue, is what fuels the historical reasoning highlighted in these four books and in social research in the Americas in general.

Perhaps a good concluding literary example is the one afforded by the novel *El Sexto*, by José María Arguedas. The title comes from the name of an old prison in Lima where Arguedas himself spent time as a political prisoner. In the novel a black inmate exclaims: 'Mi pene lo mató' (My dick killed him). As the final pages of the novel explain, the prisoner had been showing off his massive phallus to other inmates for a coin at a time until he had collected enough money to buy the

knife with which he killed the warden. Contained in this violent metaphor are centuries of racial, sexual and political frustrations, confabulated and expressed in unpredictable cultural ways. This image also illustrates one of the great insights contained in these four works, which is that it doesn't matter which weapon (pen or sexual organ) we use to impart the social change that is desperately needed in Latin America. Scholarship, like any other cultural enterprise, is but one more medium for maximum effect.

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O. Hugo Benavides is Associate Professor of Anthropology, International Political Economy and Development, and of Latin American and Latino Studies at Fordham University. <benavides@fordham.edu>

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