

Book Review

- *Republics of the New World: The Revolutionary Political Experiment in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, by Hilda Sabato, Princeton University Press, 2018.

Hilda Sabato's *Republics of the New World* is a welcome and necessary synthetic study of the world region that defined republicanism in the nineteenth century. Since the 1990s, at least, the study of nation and state formation has transformed our understandings of nineteenth-century Latin America. However, both the still extant master narratives of nineteenth-century Latin America and general world histories do not reflect this historiographical revolution; they still tend to see nineteenth-century Latin American republicanism as merely a façade, masking only corruption, fraud, and caudillos serving elite interests. Sabato's highly readable and accessible volume (suitable for undergraduates) succeeds in replacing this older master narrative with a new story, in which Latin America's nineteenth-century republics are exciting, often successful experiments in creating new political cultures and practices.

Sabato's volume focuses on mainland Spanish America in the first fifty years after independence, when 'a common political pattern developed and prevailed from the 1820s to the 1870s,' although political changes in the last quarter of the century are also examined (p. 208). Therefore, the Caribbean and Brazil are largely not considered. Sabato's starting point is the adoption of the principle of popular sovereignty during the Independence era and the two great problems this engendered: how to legitimize a new political authority and how to define the territorial and human limits of the now sovereign people. A number of themes guide the narrative. Sabato rejects that politics were only of interest to a small elite group, huddled in their capitals, to whom the great mass was indifferent or ignorant. Instead, the focus is on the interaction of the few and the many. Sabato emphasizes similarities with Europe and especially the United States, such as the tradition of citizen-soldier militias complimenting and competing with professional armies, instead of assuming difference. Yet, while Spanish Americans certainly looked to historical and contemporary

examples of other republics, they ‘did not mimic any of the existing models; rather, they adapted and innovated, adopted and rejected external influences according to their own legacies and experiences’ (p. 5). Sabato then proceeds to follow these themes through three central formal and informal institutions of republicanism, each meriting a chapter: elections, militias of armed citizens, and public opinion.

After the introduction, however, the first full chapter deals with the Independence era. Sabato is less interested in the process of independence itself than with the choices about sovereignty political actors in the New World had to make upon victory. In this chapter, and throughout the book, she carefully explores how older, colonially defined words, such as ‘sovereignty,’ ‘independence,’ or ‘representation,’ were invested with new, often competing meanings, and used in new contexts, altering them yet further. Unlike in Italy, France and Spain, after independence, Spanish Americans stuck with their republics, once they were established, with only the momentary French Intervention in Mexico marring their record. Republican officials would be chosen through elections, but the legitimacy of officials’ exercise of power would be mediated by public opinion and an armed citizenry, both of which would seek to judge and control officials’ conduct.

The chapters on elections, militias, and public opinion are all thorough and revealing syntheses of the prevailing literature. Sabato posits that the terms of how authority was legitimized — via elections, armed citizenship, and public opinion — was worked out through negotiations between ‘the few and the many’ (p. 170). Of course, however, these negotiations were not between equals, in spite of the importance of equality as a discourse, but highly asymmetrical, which both partially reflected and reproduced inequalities in the broader society. Elections had long been ignored, dismissed as meaningless fraudulent pantomimes; however, Sabato carefully reviews how elections worked, the purposes they served, and how they meditated between elite and popular groups. Furthermore, she notes that concerning suffrage rights, participation rates, contested outcomes, fraud, and machine politics, there were more similarities than differences with the United States and Europe. Militias were key to understanding party politics, the civic liturgy, and revolutions. Sabato argues that civil wars, uprisings, and caudillos were not exceptional or only representing atavistic, pre-modern violence, but simply part of the nineteenth century’s repertoire of politics, emerging out of ‘complex webs of political transformation brought about — precisely — by the transition to modernity’ (p. 175). The armed, active citizen was central to republicanism and the right to oppose despotism was based on ideas of natural rights, more powerful than notions of positive law and order, at least until late in the century.

This powerful book covers so many important historiographic debates that, inevitably, there will be quibbles. While recognizing major changes took place during and after the 1870s in regard to democratic and republican politics, the book at times, if not always, tends to flatten the preceding 50 years into one story, minimizing change over time during this period. One could argue that the independence era, the 1830 and 1840s, and the period after 1850 had fairly distinct political cultures. However, while perhaps sacrificing detail, the book gains clarity. Sabato also assumes ‘political modernity’ (p. 203) as a real, valid yardstick, ushered in by the Atlantic revolutions, instead of as a normative vision contested by historical actors, with modernity’s meaning changing violently across time and space (p. 203). Finally, although the book focuses on elite/plebeian relations, the voices of subalterns themselves, and the varied meanings they gave to democracy and republicanism, are largely missing.

Sabato’s impressive work goes a long way to correcting and updating the master narrative of politics in the nineteenth century. Sabato convinces the reader that while most histories of republicanism focus on Europe and the United States, the Spanish American republics can no longer be ignored; instead, their daring adoption of republicanism must be central to any understanding of the political transformations of the nineteenth-century world.

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