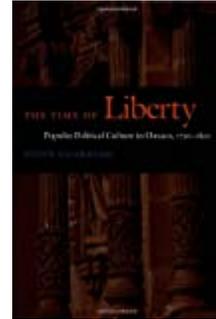




Peter Guardino. *The Time of Liberty: Popular Political Culture in Oaxaca, 1750-1850.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. 405 S. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3520-7.



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P. Guardino: The Time of Liberty. Popular Political Culture in Oaxaca

Recently interpretations of Latin American independence have changed dramatically. Understanding has moved from a merely anti-colonial movement to a perspective wherein political transformations in Latin America form an integral part of the "age of revolutions" which earlier had been considered to be exclusively of European and US-American character. Historians now argue that major changes in the political system took place from the end of the colonial period to the end of the independence period. They emphasize the impact of the Spanish monarchical crisis in 1808 and the Spanish constitution of 1812. Thus, independence did not only sever bonds with Spain, but also brought about a profound political change leading to the establishment of sovereign states in the first decades of the 19th century based on new forms of political representation. In addition the impulse of subaltern studies stimulated new approaches among historians of Latin America in order to better understand Latin American societies and their history from bottom up.

Peter Guardino aptly interweaves both tendencies. The author interprets the time from 1808 onwards as a

period of rapid change. He stresses the impact of the constitution of Cádiz on political culture as being even more important than independence from Spain. These transformations were set in motion by the elite. But Guardino is not only interested in how this elite influenced subalterns in Mexico, but as well how subalterns reacted to and took advantage of these changes to meet their own ends. The study compares urban plebeians of Antequera, the capital of the province of Oaxaca in Mexico and the only major Spanish settlement in the province on the one hand, and the indigenous peasants of Villa Alta, a remote district in the north eastern part of Oaxaca on the other.

Political culture in the eighteenth century in both, city and countryside, shared some characteristics, as for example the important role religion and patriarchy played in the everyday lives of the Oaxaqueños. Political authority derived from proximity to the king. But there existed some differences as well, especially in the communal institutions. While only members of the elite held positions in the "cabildo" (city council) of Antequera the cargo system in the indigenous "repúblicas" of Villa Alta obliged all male inhabitants to community service.

Nevertheless, the cargo system was far from egalitarian. Indian nobles insisted on their privileges and used the colonial judicial system to have their noble status confirmed.

Even though the Bourbon reformers intended to implement a new "authoritarianism" in the second half of the 18th century, Guardino comes to the conclusion that they ultimately failed to do so, because they were more concerned about the increase of royal revenues than in other long-term goals. In addition, the Bourbon reforms had only a limited impact on the everyday political routines of ordinary people, because the rulers did not consider the lower social groups as possible contributors to the intended transformations.

With the monarchical crisis in 1808 a period of dramatic changes started. The rising notion of national sovereignty was connected to an almost universal male suffrage installed by the Constitution of Cádiz. Contrary to the interpretation of scholars like François X. Guerra for whom the new political methods were incompatible with the traditional social structure in Mexico, Guardino argues that urban plebeians for the first time could participate in the elections and furthermore actually did so. They were not moved by clientelism, but because elections offered new opportunities. But, urban politics became dominated by the conflict between the two emergent parties in Oaxaca, the "vinagres" (later becoming liberals) and the "aceites" (later becoming conservatives). Their existence did not fit into the political culture, because political pluralism and competition were not accepted. Furthermore, national politics intervened and thus sharpened conflicts.

In his discussion of urban politics Guardino can rectify earlier assumptions. While the "vinagres", earlier equated with liberals of the second half of the nineteenth century, did not act against religion and the church as liberals would do later, the conservative "aceites" did not opt for centralism in the 1820s but favoured federalism. The analysis of urban politics is in large part a discussion of these emerging political groups and their most important representatives. The latter were in their majority members of prominent families of the city. I agree with Guardino that social origin alone does not explain the ideological orientation of a person (p. 186s.), but still think that it might give some clues to better understand political affinities. In spite of his denial the author himself does support such a view. For instance when he describes the "vinagres" as a group composed of members

of the middle class (p. 205), or when he is not surprised of the conservative orientation of a member of one of the principal families of Antequera (p. 216). Guardino's emphasis on the biographies of some important political leaders in urban Oaxaca in the end fails to explain the background of political orientations. Urban plebeian political culture remains obscure to a certain extent, which is due to the lack of sources, as Guardino admits.

The most convincing parts of the book are those on Villa Alta. Within the communities the new political impulses helped to change the internal power structure. When egalitarian discourse and popular elections gained importance since 1808 these were successfully used by part of the community to challenge the cargo system. In addition, after independence, a new form of leadership, "caciquismo", arose due to outside interference, even though it was not the main form of power-holding during the time under study. With respect to the autonomy of the communities Guardino stresses continuity rather than change. Contrary to authors who interpret the municipalisation of the colonial "repúblicas de indios" after independence as a dramatic loss of autonomy, he argues that the indigenous population could retain its autonomy with respect to internal affairs, because of the willingness of state politicians to make compromises. In exchange for considerable tax contributions autonomy was granted to the indigenous communities. Guardino makes a convincing point in showing the interconnectedness and interdependence of indigenous peasants with the outer world and their aptness to employ norms and institutions of larger society to bring about changes in their communities, too. Even though the main interest of the rural indigenous population lay in the internal conditions of their communities this did not mean that they had no vision of the larger framework.

Guardino draws the conclusion that urban plebeians and the rural indigenous population did not promote these changes. They nevertheless, not only had to cope with them but seized the opportunities offered by new laws and procedures to follow their own goals. But the urban masses had lesser chances to do so than the members of indigenous communities. In sum, Guardino has provided a beautifully written and inspiring study that provokes further research, especially on the question, why the "time of liberty" did not last longer and Mexican political history took a route that led to restrictions of political liberty. Guardino's book should find a wide readership among scholars and students alike.

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