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Review/Reseña

William E. Skuban, *Lines in the Sand: Nationalism and Identity on the Peruvian-Chilean Frontier*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

Revisiting nationalism on the Peru-Chile border

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If a nation is a “daily plebiscite,” in Renan’s words, what better place to study nationalism than a disputed border region called upon to decide its nationality by plebiscite? Within the crowded field of studies on national identity, Skuban’s monograph stands out for his particularly good choice of a topic. Well written and clearly argued, *Lines in the Sand* analyzes the competing nationalist discourses in the provinces of Tacna and Arica that had remained in Chilean hands following Peru’s defeat in the War of the Pacific (1879-1883). The Treaty of Ancón that ended the war

called for a plebiscite to decide the fate of these provinces. Postponed for many decades, the plebiscite was finally cancelled altogether as tensions and violence rose prior to the scheduled date of 1925-6. The 1929 Treaty of Lima eventually allocated Tacna to Peru and Arica to Chile through a process of international arbitration. Yet the longstanding expectation over many decades that a plebiscite would take place set a very dramatic scene in this region as both the Peruvian and Chilean states sought to influence definitions of national identity.

Skuban carefully analyzes the workings of the Peruvian and Chilean state-centered nationalist projects as they filtered down into local society. He pays close attention to the relationship between social class and national identity—a welcome approach at a time when historians seem to have forgotten to study social classes. *Lines in the Sand* covers a broad social spectrum, both urban and rural: elites, middle sectors, working classes, women, and indigenous communities. His focus on rural society is based on a case study of a dispute between two indigenous communities left on either side of the newly created border with Chile.

Skuban argues against an earlier view that had portrayed Peru as simply a victim of a more powerful Chilean state that controlled the two provinces. While the Chilean government certainly had the upper hand in seeking to stifle the transmission of Peruvian nationalism, the Peruvian state and social actors had agency in the process of defining the region's future. While this contentious issue has been analyzed from the standpoint of international relations, Skuban examines the social history of the dispute and its impact on the local populations. The primary sources used range from a census and diplomatic papers, to newspapers and published interviews.

The study also has broader theoretical implications for the study of nationalism. Two broad typologies—civic and cultural nationalism—can both be seen at work. On the one hand, the Chilean state argued for a voluntaristic or “civic nationalism” as it attempted to convince the inhabitants of the region to choose a Chilean over a Peruvian nationality (although the Chilean state also drew on more essentialist views of nationalism by bringing in the issue of race and contrasting white Chileans

to Peruvian Indians). On the other hand, the Peruvian state attempted to maintain Peruvian allegiance in an area that had historically been Peruvian by appealing to “cultural nationalism”—the notion that certain ethnic and historical ties defined national identity.

While local history, theoretical issues, and the process of international arbitration all receive ample treatment, the national context for this regional dispute receives somewhat less attention. Given the different processes of state building in Peru and Chile, more reference to national political history for both countries would have helped to establish a contrast between a weaker Peruvian state and a stronger Chilean state. Chile had not only the advantage of controlling Tacna and Arica during this period, but also enjoyed a stronger institutional legacy than Peru in the area of state-building. Likewise, further context on Chilean working-class culture would have helped to explain the comparatively more combative side of the Chilean working class referred to in Chapter 5.

The first chapter offers a historical overview of the border region from colonial times through the War of the Pacific, and a detailed account of the international negotiations that ended in 1929. The heart of the dispute that led to the War can be traced back to Chile’s increasing interest during the 1870s in the nitrate-rich territories to its North, held by Peru and Bolivia. Wary of Chilean expansion, Peru and Bolivia signed a secret defense pact in 1873. Following Bolivia’s attempts to levy taxes on the Antofagasta Nitrate and Railroad Company, and the Peruvian government’s nationalization of private companies, war broke out. After the defeat of Peru and Bolivia, and a period of Chilean occupation in Lima, the Treaty of Ancón ended the War of the Pacific and called for the people of these provinces to eventually decide their national affiliation through a plebiscite. Continuous disagreement between the two countries led to the postponement of the plebiscite, which was never held. Finally, in 1929, with United States mediation, Tacna returned to Peru while Arica remained Chilean. This broad time frame of about fifty years between the end of the War of the Pacific and the final arbitration sets the stage for the competing nationalisms analyzed by Skuban.

In the second chapter, Skuban examines the ways in which both the Peruvian and Chilean states attempted to promote an “official nationalism” (Benedict Anderson’s term). He describes two separate processes: first, a process of surveillance over the population of Tacna and Arica in an effort to assess the prospects of winning a plebiscite, and second, the promotion of “official nationalism” through the control of the main vehicles for the formation of a national identity, such as schools, the press and the churches. While the process of surveillance was easier for Chile because it controlled the provinces, the Peruvian government also developed an information network through *delegados* (private citizens representing the Peruvian state) and *comisionados* (agents) who sent reports to Peru’s Foreign Ministry. Both states kept a close watch on the population of the provinces and particularly on the proportion of Peruvians and Chileans, in anticipation of a possible plebiscite. The Chilean government had greater power than the Peruvian over demographics: it deported Peruvians from Tacna and relocated Chileans into the region (although the author points out that it may be impossible to prove to what degree this was in fact a deliberate strategy of the Chilean government).

The Chilean state also had a clear advantage with its institutional control of the area. In 1900 it succeeded in shutting down a number of Peruvian private schools, and in 1910 Peruvian priests were expelled from the area. While official attempts to silence Peruvian newspapers failed, in 1911 vandalism eventually accomplished the task as a mob of workers destroyed the offices of two Peruvian newspapers, *Voz del Sur* and *El Tacora*. Despite official complaints by the Peruvian government, these attacks were never directly linked to the Chilean state. The closing of schools led Peruvian civil society to respond. Many of these schools continued to function clandestinely in people’s homes. Women played an important role in these schools and thus in the promotion of nationalism. The schools were connected to voluntary associations such as *La Sociedad de Socorros Mutuos de Señoras*. Peru’s eminent historian Jorge Basadre recalls attending such a school as a child.

Chapter 3 describes the escalation of the nationalist campaign in the years leading up to the cancelled plebiscite, originally scheduled for 1925-6.

This brief period brought an intensification of the tactics used during previous decades, including violence and coercion. The Chilean state used a census as a way of both calculating potential success in a plebiscite, and engineering categories of national identity that would benefit Chile. The 1923 census also promoted a racialized conception of nationality with census categories that tended to portray Chileans as whites. In turn, the reopened Peruvian newspaper *La Voz del Sur* launched an aggressive propaganda campaign. In response to Chilean propaganda that portrayed Peruvians as racially inferior (a reference to Peru's more heavily indigenous population), the Peruvian newspapers responded by essentializing national character and portraying Chileans as "aggressive, warmongering, alcoholic and innately criminal" (80). Wars of words gave way to actual street violence, such as the assault of street vendors selling *La Voz del Sur*. The Plebiscitary Commission also remained concerned with the deportation of Peruvians from the area and the violent activities of Chilean *ligas patrióticas* that promoted the Chilean cause by intimidating the citizens of the area.

Chapter 4 examines the way in which members of the Tacna elite constituted a public sphere made up of voluntary associations and mutual aid societies that challenged some aspects of state-centered nationalism while reinforcing a sense of patriotism through songs and writings. Although women were not officially part of this public sphere, they participated in important ways in promoting patriotic values—for example, to counter the Chilean influence in the schools, Peruvian women ran schools out of their homes, and increasingly, through their writings, some women, such as Zoila Isabel Cáceres, participated in a national trend of women gradually breaking into the public sphere.

Chapter 5 examines the participation of the popular sectors in the battles over national identity. Skuban argues that artisans and workers formulated their own view of national identity that played a role in developing a culture of resistance to the Chilean presence. He analyzes popular songs that emphasized loyalty to Peru, and discusses stories such as that of a young boy who says that he wants to become an aviator so that he can drop bombs on the Chilean city of Santiago. In addition to these

songs and stories, the popular sectors formed mutual aid societies such as *La Sociedad de Artesanos*, which reinforced an incipient worker identity, one of many voluntary associations. Meanwhile, a parallel process of working class formation was occurring with the arrival of Chilean workers sent in by the Chilean state to work on the railroad, the nitrate plants, and in other industries such as a shoe factory. The original solidarity among Peruvian, Chilean and Bolivian workers gave way to tensions when, following a massacre of striking workers in 1907 at a nitrate plant, British nitrate companies began to hire more Peruvian and Bolivian workers rather than their combative Chilean counterparts. When the nitrate industry further declined and led to unemployment, the nationalist card loomed large as Peruvian workers were accused of taking Chilean jobs. Some of the same ensuing mob violence that had shut down Peruvian newspapers led to the destruction of the *Sociedad de Artesanos*. Chilean voluntary associations such as the National Patriotic League contributed to foster a sense of national identity on the Chilean side. This chapter could have provided some Bolivian historical context, given the presence of Bolivian workers and the fact that Bolivia also lost territory during the War of the Pacific.

The final chapter examines two indigenous Aymara communities whose disputes over water became entangled in the larger national controversy when the Ticalaco River became a border marker between Peru and Chile. Like the worker struggles, the struggles in these communities also turned violent on various occasions. Thus a local issue became a national one, when *comuneros* from one community (Tarata) crossed the newly established border to attack those from another community (Ticaco). National borders also interfered with local custom as Peruvian authorities banned the *comuneros* of Tarata from extracting guano from islands located in Peruvian territory. Meanwhile, *comuneros* proved adept at using national identity on their own behalf and defended their patriotism before Peruvian state authorities. By framing their demands in national terms, indigenous people demonstrated their dexterity in appropriating the elites' nationalist discourse. Skuban enters the classic historiographical debate regarding the relationship between Indians and nation by claiming that

Indians understood nationhood quite well and used this new national identity to further their own interests.

This study will be valuable for scholars and students of Latin American history and will also be of interest within the broader field of studies on nationalism and borders. Its main strength lies in the careful examination of how nationalism operates at a local level among different social classes, in their interactions amongst each other, and with agents of the central state. Skuban appropriately ends the story with reference to more recent events—it wasn't until 1999 that the two governments finally managed to resolve the issue outlined by the Treaty of Lima of granting Peru a port in the Chilean territory of Arica. His final reflection is worth quoting: "And in the historical imagination of many the Tacna-Arica controversy lingers on, and the lines in the sand continue to shift, and the question may be asked: Is any frontier ever really closed?"