



Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 2011, 346-354
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Review/Reseña

Peter V. N. Henderson, *Gabriel Garcia Moreno and Conservative State Formation in the Andes*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

A Biography of Conservative State Formation

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This is a book about Gabriel García Moreno, the leading political figure in Ecuador from 1859 to 1875. García Moreno's feverish support for the Catholic Church and dictatorial adherence to the idea of progress at any cost has made him one of Ecuador's most controversial historical figures. As president, García Moreno dedicated Ecuador to the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and built a durable dictatorship that oversaw the first large-scale attempt to transform Ecuador into a modern nation-state. The book is structured as a biography, following García Moreno's life from cradle to

grave, but also addresses broader themes including patronage politics, regionalism, national identity, and *caudillismo*. The author primarily engages García Moreno's many biographers in an effort to "rewrite the life and times of Gabriel García Moreno in a more measured way" (xiv). Henderson challenges the common depiction of García Moreno as a religious fanatic and ruthless dictator, arguing instead that he provided a "thoughtful conservative alternative" (xii) to the social and political upheaval following the independence wars, ushering Ecuador into an era of modernization and state formation cut short only by the dictator's untimely death at the hands of liberal detractors.

Early chapters paint a favorable portrait of García Moreno's political ascendancy, from his birth in 1821 to his entry into national politics in 1859. Henderson maintains that García Moreno emerged from this period as a moderate politician whose political success resulted from his ability to forge networks of support among family and friends throughout the country, from the liberal-minded coastal city of Guayaquil (García Moreno's birthplace) to the highland cities of Quito and Cuenca, where conservative landowners and the Church held sway. The author is also concerned with the "making of a leader" in the classic biographical sense, addressing issues of personal character and readiness for leadership. We learn that García Moreno was intelligent, hard working, faithful to his wife, loyal to his friends, modest about his academic accomplishments, and didn't seek material wealth. These conclusions are meant to offset the better-known personality traits of the "Grand Tyrant," as García Moreno's opponents referred to him, such as being vituperative, impetuous, mercurial, and uncompromising (22, 17, 116).

Biographical analysis more relevant to the process of state formation pursues García Moreno's seemingly contradictory passions for science and Catholicism. García Moreno's staunch public defense of the erudite and internationalist Jesuit order, which he argued would bring much-needed expertise and discipline to Ecuador, led to his exile in Peru and France from 1853 to 1856. While in Paris, García Moreno studied physics, chemistry, zoology, and even published a paper in the French Academy of Science. Around the same time García Moreno underwent a "spiritual awakening"

from which he developed a worldview infused with ultramontanist, or the ideological assertion of supreme papal authority. García Moreno reasoned that ultramontanist could challenge Enlightenment liberalism as the cultural basis for the nascent Ecuadorian nation. Thus, Henderson aptly shows how García Moreno's European exile led to a genesis of conservative political philosophy in which both religion and science shaped his vision of a devoutly Catholic, modern Ecuadorian nation. Upon returning home in 1856, García Moreno's ongoing defense of church authority endeared him to the pious and launched him into the national political limelight where he would remain until his brutal death in 1875. Also worth noting, if the intervening years are any indication, Napoleon III's well-ordered Paris probably demonstrated to García Moreno the efficacy of authoritarianism.

In fact, in chapter two, Henderson seems to imply that Ecuador *needed* stern leadership, casting geographical, political, and economic divisions as obstacles to, rather than constitutive of, García Moreno's "practical and visionary state-formation project" (32). The author provides a blow-by-blow account of the regional civil war (1859-60) that pitted the highland provisional government, led by García Moreno, against the more liberal coastal elite, with the southern highlands falling in-between. According to Henderson, the war allowed García Moreno to "hone his leadership skills and reach a greater understanding about how to create a nation" (32), basically through blunt, centralized governance.

In the following two chapters Henderson addresses the domestic and international constraints on García Moreno's first presidential term from 1861 to 1865, arguing that the future dictator could not yet impose his will. Since most historians have focused on García Moreno's second, more overtly authoritarian, presidency from 1869 to 1875, Henderson's attention to his first term in office is novel. The 1861 federalist constitution imposed two principle constraints on García Moreno's rule: it empowered municipal authorities and put congress in charge of military decisions. Nevertheless, the outlines of García Moreno's ambitious plans became apparent during this period. First, he sought to impose a concordat to serve as a papal bulwark against liberalism, the influence of which García Moreno treated like the plague. Secondly, though he eschewed decentralized government,

popular sovereignty, and individual liberties, he embraced the liberal dogma of economic progress through free trade and the introduction of new technologies. Thus, the Church became the primary means by which García Moreno would forge a national culture, and the construction of roads, railways, and telegraph lines would bind his fellow countrymen, quite literally, to the modernizing state.

Indeed, to pay for and build new infrastructure, García Moreno enforced the *trabajo subsidiario*—a state-run labor draft with roots in the colonial era—that required indigenous peasants to “volunteer” four days of labor annually or pay the monetary equivalent. Landlords had previously enforced the labor draft locally, but García Moreno implemented the policy on a national scale, highlighting how indigenous communities bore the brunt of the state-building burden.¹ Significant improvements were made to the 320-mile cart road between Quito and Guayaquil, including 71 bridges and 55 drainage canals. Work began on a national railway network and telegraph lines stretch throughout much of the highlands. The author concludes that foreign wars, public debt, and a stingy oligarchy stalled García Moreno’s efforts to modernize Ecuador, particularly during his first term in office. But the fact that armed guards often accompanied tax collectors into the countryside (84), and “the almost unconquerable repugnance felt by the majority of the Indians” (131) in the highlands, also point to a defiant population unwilling to do García Moreno’s bidding.

Additional evidence of an unwieldy underclass emerges from Henderson’s examination of multiple foreign invasions from Peru and Colombia, stoked in part by García Moreno’s fiery personality. The author dangles the idea that García Moreno may have had the foresight to instigate foreign conflicts as a means to create a sense of national unity, but military defeats and desertions prevailed. At one point Henderson laments, “indigenous conscripts had little, if any, sense of patriotism, understanding of Ecuador, or interest in García Moreno’s quest for honor” (102). The author further asks, “What happened to the vaunted patriotism and national sentiment described by the governors and commanders who sent

¹ See Derek Williams, “Assembling the ‘Empire of Morality’: State Building Strategies in Catholic Ecuador, 1861-1875,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 14 (2001): 149-74.

the units into battle? Probably the conscripted peon remained personally loyal to his region rather than to the larger abstract entity of Ecuador” (110). Perhaps indigenous conscripts expressed multiple identities contingent on specific circumstances. Perhaps governors and commanders were just telling García Moreno what they thought he wanted to here. And perhaps peons were forced to fight or had other motivations for joining the cause, such as material remuneration. Unfortunately, Henderson declines to pursue such possibilities. What’s worse, the author provides no evidence for the sweeping claims he does make. Thus an interesting moment to analyze the mechanics of state-formation is dismissed as an unfortunate example of the García Moreno’s bad luck.²

Henderson provides plenty of evidence, on the other hand, that whatever followers García Moreno garnered during his first term in office could have been motivated as much by fear as by personal loyalty or a sense of patriotism. Repression and even execution of perceived enemies was the norm under García Moreno. The president frequently exiled his opponents to Ecuador’s Amazonian lowlands, a region long cast as an overgrown backwater of cultural and moral decay. After García Moreno discovered an assassination plot against him that implicated one of his top generals, he ignored the constitutional provision outlawing capital punishment for conspirators, opting instead to have the general executed without trial. According to Henderson, García Moreno’s decision “seems justifiable” (113). In short, if it is true that García Moreno’s first presidential term was constrained by domestic and international pressures and therefore he could not have been a dictator during that period, it is also true that it was not for lack of trying. But perhaps more important than the question of whether or not García Moreno had become a dictator yet, is the intriguing evidence of a third significant constraint on his rule: the numerous and potentially explosive lower classes.

Henderson’s treatment of *caudillismo* takes a similar tack by

² Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature on political culture in nineteenth-century Ecuador. See A. Kim Clark and Marc Becker, eds., *Highland Indians and the State in Modern Ecuador* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); and the bibliographic essay on Ecuador in Brooke Larson, *Trials of Nation Making: Liberalism, Race, and Ethnicity in the Andes, 1810-1910* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

employing a conventional definition of strongman rule that emphasizes alliances with the oligarchy and the importance of charismatic leadership. García Moreno displayed military prowess when he commanded two hundred troops and crushed a brief liberal insurgency in the coastal city of Jambalí in 1865. Despite being badly outnumbered, García Moreno emerged victorious and promptly executed twenty-seven of the “pirates,” as he called them, including the Argentine liberal Santiago Viola. Henderson contends that García Moreno’s military success and ruthlessness enhanced his reputation and increased his popularity, making him a quintessential caudillo.³

A more compelling case of support for García Moreno came in the aftermath of a massive earthquake that rocked the northern highland province of Imbabura in 1868, killing between fifteen and twenty thousand people. The disaster provided García Moreno with an opportunity to win the hearts and minds of Ecuadorians and become an “indispensable man” (140). As the newly appointed Civil and Military Chief of the province, García Moreno mobilized highlanders to produce much-needed clothing and shoes, and further attracted monetary donations for rebuilding efforts, all amidst an indigenous rebellion and widespread looting (136). Henderson claims that in the aftermath of the quake García Moreno “enjoyed the popularity necessary to become a successful caudillo” (140). However popular, upon running for a second presidential term in 1869, García Moreno chose to forgo the electoral process and installed himself in power through a coup d’état. But rather than interpret García Moreno’s seizure of power as evidence of his dictatorial proclivities, Henderson concludes that, “Not unreasonably, García Moreno interpreted the country’s acquiescence as a mandate for his *ideas*” [my emphasis] (145).

Henderson’s reasoning is that because Ecuadorians were devoutly Catholic (Simón Bolívar famously quipped, “Ecuador is a monastery.”), and García Moreno sought to create a Catholic nation, his plans essentially

³ For in-depth explanations of why people joined caudillos, if they did so at all, see Charles F. Walker, *Smoldering Ashes: Cuzco and the Making of Republican Peru, 1780-1840* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 186-221; Ariel de la Fuente, *Children of Facundo: Caudillo and Gaucho Insurgency During the Argentine State-Formation Process; La Rioja, 1853-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), Introduction.

reflected the will of the people (146). The 1869 Constitution that, in García Moreno's words, tried to "harmonize our political institutions with our religious beliefs," made Catholicism a requirement for citizenship. It outlawed unwarranted arrests, ensured due process, and allowed for free association and expression, but only "as long as [citizens] respected religion, morality, and decency" (149). Not surprisingly, the Church became a powerful force for cultural change under García Moreno. French monks and nuns staffed schools and hospitals. German Jesuits ran the Polytechnic University with a curriculum infused with natural sciences and Christian morality. Bolstered by increased tax revenues from cacao exports, school construction proliferated throughout the country, doubling the number of elementary students by 1875. Yet while Henderson provides an astute institutional analysis of the Church's nation-building role under García Moreno, there is little indication of how Catholicism was practiced and understood by adherents. In the author's formulation, most Ecuadorians were both Catholic enough to acquiesce in García Moreno's nation-building plans but not Catholic enough to avoid the dictator's moralizing mission, an uneasy tension that could have been pursued further.⁴

All in all, this is a deeply researched and clearly written book that draws on material from an impressive array of archives located in the capital. Henderson is at his best when he painstakingly unpacks the tangled debates between liberals and conservatives and reveals how García Moreno's conservative-authoritarian project of nation building was at once reactionary and forward looking, relying on church institutions and colonial labor schemes to unify and modernize a deeply fractured state. Henderson also adds new texture to our understanding of García Moreno the man and should be commended for his close scrutiny of the more polemical accounts of the dictator's rule. That said, because the author

⁴ Other historians have conceptualized the role of Catholicism under García Moreno as an official discourse that provided legitimacy for the state as well as a source of national identity. See Juan Manguashca, ed., *Historia y Región en el Ecuador, 1830-1930* (Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional, 1994), 355-420; Derek Williams, "The Making of Ecuador's Pueblo Católico, 1861-1875," in Nils Jacobson and Cristóbal Aljovín de Losada, eds. *Political Cultures in the Andes, 1750-1950* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 207-229. A more elusive question is how diverse manifestations of popular culture and religiosity found expression, albeit partial and contingent, in official Catholicism, thereby contributing to institutional legitimacy and notions of collective identity.

largely ignores anyone outside a García Moreno's small circle of associates, we learn little about what his ideas, language, and encounters with the broader population reveal about the life and times in which he lived. Highlighting García Moreno's virtues without deeper analysis of the political culture in which he operated makes his portrayal as a "benevolent dictator" read more like an apologetic than a political history.

A similar problem cripples Henderson's analysis of state formation as well. Set against the political and social upheaval that followed the independence wars, the author's claim that Ecuador under García Moreno was more unified—both culturally and in a practical sense—is persuasive (208). But the author's reliance on official documents and correspondence, as well as his tendency to read them at face value, produces more questions than answers. Henderson warns early on that this is a study devoted to "high politics," but he also claims to contribute to the "new political history," going so far as to state that "Gabriel García Moreno envisioned a unique nation that captured the spirit of the Ecuadorian people" (241). Yet there is no sustained discussion of race, class, or gender, and broader segments of the population, including women, Afro-Ecuadorians, and indigenous peasants, receive scant attention. While García Moreno successfully created an inter-regional power bloc that kept him in power for close to fifteen years, stability within the ruling class belies the contentious political culture on the ground. For example, Henderson glosses over important rebellions in the heavily indigenous provinces of Cañar (1862), Imbabura and Azuay (1871), and Chimborazo (1872), all of which call attention to deep racial and ethnic divisions in Ecuador. A more thorough analysis of these conflicts might help explain García Moreno's back-channel diplomatic request that Ecuador become a protectorate of France, as well as his appeal to Peru for military intervention on behalf of his faltering provisional government. Both inquiries receive considerable attention in the book, yet further analysis may have demonstrated the limits of García Moreno's faith in nation making from within.

Furthermore, Henderson's conclusion that García Moreno would have been more successful had the army been more loyal and regional cleavages less profound seems to create an artificial separation between the

man and his milieu. This partly reflects the challenges inherent in writing biographies.⁵ But in a telling example, Henderson explains how, in response to the uncovering of a plot to topple his provisional government, García Moreno had one of the conspirators, a 70 year-old independence hero of African decent, whipped in public. Henderson shows how the gruesome details of the event were exaggerated by subsequent historical accounts, but concedes that the whipping was motivated in part by García Moreno's racism which in turn prompted two of his top officers to resign in protest (50). While Henderson dwells on the disloyalty of the soldiers, casting the event as indicative of the obstacles García Moreno faced while in power, this story also reveals how important sectors of the army *resisted* racism, even when it emanated from the highest public office. But again, this is not a social history. The author is more concerned with what he calls the "real body politic"—the "landlord class, state bureaucrats, and professional men" (42) with whom García Moreno skillfully forged political alliances that would keep him in power for over a decade. Still, one can't help but wonder about the popular political cultures bubbling beneath the surface of stability during García Moreno's time. As one of the dictator's associates exclaimed upon hearing of García Moreno's brutal assassination-by-machete in 1875, "The Republic is on a volcano" (235). Ecuador under García Moreno sounds explosive indeed.

⁵ David Nasaw, "Introduction," AHR roundtable on Historians and Biography, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (June 2009): 573-578.